

A close-up portrait of a young man with light brown hair and blue eyes, looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. He is wearing a white tank top and a thin gold chain necklace. The background is plain white.

ROMEO FALLING

JESSE H REIGN

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For the daydreamers

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Chapter titles in *Romeo Falling* are quotations from William Shakespeare's masterpiece, *Romeo and Juliet*

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Romeo Falling is an angsty, obsessive, possessive MM Romance. It contains on-page cheating (not between MC's), death of a close family member, and depression. While there's pining and heartache aplenty, an epic, hard-won HEA is absolutely guaranteed.

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“HIS NAME IS ROMEO”

Now

ROMEO ALWAYS SAID THERE was a forcefield spanning the length and breadth of our town. A join in the tar, a slight step down that tracks across the motorway just near the *Welcome to Alabaster Falls* sign on the outskirts of town. He said that was where the forcefield started. He said that when car tires bumped over the seam in the road, time was altered. It changed. It moved slower and faster. Nothing happened for hours and days, but years passed in the blink of an eye. He said that in Alabaster, life was a dream that happened while we slept.

He was always saying things like that.

For all I know, he still does.

Blue sky and dappled foliage form a long, cloudy trail on either side of me as I careen down the highway. Now and again, the cloud is flecked with long, thin streaks of crimson. Sour cherries. Red, but not ripe. Not yet. My belly clenches as I round the bend and the sign comes into view.

Welcome to Alabaster Falls

Welcome.

Ha!

How long has it been since I've felt welcome here?

The sign is faded, but it's hard to tell if it's more faded than the last time I was home or if it's the same. It's possible it was already as faded as a sign can get long before I left Alabaster. It isn't just faded now though. It's crooked, too, and that's new. A subtle tilt down on the left. A screw that's come loose and hasn't been replaced.

I spot the tear in time, as Romeo used to call the seam in the road, about a hundred feet away. I wouldn't notice it if I didn't know it was there, but it was a big deal to us when we were kids, so I do. Romeo said we had to lift both feet, they couldn't touch anything but air when we crossed it, or the tear would rip. At some point, that little ritual evolved to include waving our hands around our heads wildly and yelling, "La-la-la-la-laaaa!" at the top of our lungs as the car *thunked* over the line.

We always did it. We were religious about it when we were little. As we got older, we stopped doing it when others were in the car with us. We didn't talk about it or make a conscious decision to do it. It just happened. When we were alone, we did it well into our twenties. At the time, it felt like one of those things that would never change. Something we'd do forever.

I slow the car, watching as the speedometer drops steadily from eighty to sixty, keeping one foot firmly on the floorboard of my Mazda while tapping the brakes with the other.

It's strange how a place can be the same yet feel completely different. The main street is just as it was when I left. Sure, there's a new fancy confection store, complete with larger-than-life twirled lollypops at the door, and Mo's Diner has become a coffee shop with a seven-page menu, but cars still park diagonally on either side of the street and kids congregate on the corner outside the hardware store while Mr. Matherson, the owner, shoos them away at regular intervals with an exasperated, "Go on. Git!"

The bell over the grocery store door sounds its tinny greeting as I enter. The lighting is better, and the place has been retiled with shiny white-and-gray checkered tiles, but the shelves and layout are unchanged.

I'm tired, worn out from the drive, and suddenly weighed down by the reality of being back, so I take a basket, not a cart, from near the flowers and potted plants and toss coffee, cream, and sugar into my basket before heading to the bakery for a loaf of fresh bread. The warm, yeasty aroma has me reaching for two loaves instead of one. I planned on ordering in tonight, but now I think some ham, cheese, and butter might be all I need.

And wine.

God knows I need wine.

To my surprise, I find a couple of bottles of 2019 Lang and Reed Cabernet Franc pushed all the way to the back of the top shelf. The bottles

are dusty, but I'm so pleased with my find that I put them both in my basket.

Maybe things have changed in Alabaster after all.

Maybe coming home won't be as bad as I've made it out to be in my head.

On a whim, I decide to see if there are any cherries in the fruit aisle. It's early in the season, but only by a week or two. There's a chance an overeager crop has made its way into stock. I have sugar, I could stew them tonight and have them with yogurt in the morning. It's a sweet-and-sour concoction I've always loved. To me, it tastes like long days and short nights. Afternoons at the pool and lazy mornings spent sleeping in. Summer days that drag out and roll into one.

My basket hangs by my side, there, but not heavy or cumbersome. I pass the grain and canned goods aisle and hang a left. I see bananas and tangerines. Rock melons stacked high. A shopping cart and a pair of legs. Long, graceful fingers cradling a melon.

There's a sharp, harsh intake of breath. It isn't mine.

Long fingers go lax.

The melon slips.

It's one of those moments when time slows. When you see something happening, but you can't move quickly enough to stop it. I see it all clearly. Pale eyes widen in shock. A mouth does too. The melon falls in distinct stages, as if in slow motion. If time were normal, I'd step forward and reach out. My hands would move. So would my legs. I'd catch it with ease.

Time is far from normal, so I stand, paralyzed, as the melon continues its descent. Slowly. Slowly. I watch as it lands. Perfectly spherical one second, oval and bulging the next. A small crack appears on the surface. A jagged line that cuts deep. It grows deeper and deeper, splitting on impact and sending a spray of sweet, sticky juice and seeds into the air and all over the floor.

The perfect lines of the white-and-gray tile are altered. Changed. Splattered like the scene of a crime.

Graceful fingers clench as if bracing for impact. A pair of wild, watery eyes find mine and blink.

I thought I had time to prepare for this moment. More time. Of course I knew it was a possibility—a probability even—that I'd see him. Alabaster Falls is a small town. A tiny town. The kind of town where everyone knows

everyone. I didn't think I'd be able to avoid him completely. It was bound to happen. I knew it would, I just thought there'd be more time. I thought I'd be ready. More ready, given how long it's been.

I'm not ready though.

And I'm sure as hell not prepared.

A familiar face swims into view. It's a face I know well. The face of the only man I've ever loved. Or hated. He takes a step back, his head and neck jerking as if he's walked into a solid surface and is reeling from the impact. His hands are raised now. Palms open, but not in surrender.

People around us stop moving. Mothers grab their children to stop them from stepping into the big mess between us. There's a short pause. A lull. And then normality resumes. People start milling around again as if nothing happened.

Not us.

We don't move.

We both stand frozen.

My chest caves and my heart stops beating. The words I manage to formulate are dry and cracked open. Foreign and familiar. They hang in the air between us as if they're suspended by the past and the present.

"Hey, Romeo."

He doesn't reply. He doesn't have time to. My mortal enemy approaches at speed. Such speed, I don't have time to react, to defend myself, or raise my guard. My enemy is slight, a slip of a person, a tiny thing with silky brown hair and large doe eyes. A sweet face and a bright smile.

Don't let that fool you.

Her capacity to cause carnage is endless.

"Jude!" she cries, throwing her arms around me. "I can't believe it! Oh my God, how long has it been?" She doesn't wait for an answer. "Too long! It's been too long. Way too long." She fixes Romeo with a stern, chastising look. "And as for you, mister, why didn't you tell me Jude was coming to town? You know I hate surprises."

She steps aside, clearing a path between us, and looks at Romeo expectantly. He's well-trained. A dutiful husband. A husband who knows his wife well and understands what she expects. I understand too. She expects us to embrace. It's what good friends do when they haven't seen each other for long periods of time, after all. It's normal.

Romeo steps forward and wraps a single arm loosely around my shoulders, taking care not to touch me any more than he absolutely has to. The smell and feel of him slices through bone. There's steel in his spine. He's hard and cold, and he somehow manages to pull me toward him and push me away. I lean in even though I don't mean to. In fact, I mean not to. I mean to hold back just as hard as he does, but he's Romeo, and my spine is spaghetti, not steel. His cheek brushes lightly against mine as I embrace him. Sandpaper on skin. I wince from the impact and disentangle myself from him as fast as I can.

My heart beats like it's under attack.

Romeo's mouth tenses at the right corner and scoots to the side. One shoulder dips, hollowing his chest, and the other draws up high enough to form a shadow under his clavicle. It's a sexy as fuck, nonchalant shrug that makes years of tears scream. Wind whips through bare branches, howling, as what happened between us years ago rushes toward me.

I'm confused. I look at him, then her, and then him again. Even though no one's talking, we're having an in-depth conversation in a language I don't understand. It takes me a full five seconds to piece it together.

She doesn't know.

Selby doesn't know that Romeo and I don't talk anymore. She has no idea there's no such thing as Romeo and me anymore. We were best friends all our lives, and it's been five years since we've said a word to each other, and his wife has no clue.

He hasn't told her a goddamn thing.

I don't know why that surprises me. Maybe it shouldn't, but it does.

"Are you coming over for dinner tonight?" Selby swipes her fingers lightly across her forehead and shakes her head. "What am I thinking? Of course you're coming over."

"Jude's had a long trip. He's tired." Romeo's face is unperturbed, features relaxed. To the innocent bystander, he shows no sign of feeling anything untoward—or feeling anything at all, for that matter. There's a very slight heaviness of his brows though, something you probably wouldn't notice unless you know him like I do. Like I did. Other than that, he looks completely at ease.

He's good. I'll give him that.

He aims his perfect face at me and fixes me with a long, warning look that clearly says *be cool*. Be cool? The fuck if I will be. "We'll see him

tomorrow though. We'll have chicken fajitas and toss a few beers back, just like the old days."

That upsets my footing, knocking me off balance and sending me reeling. Spinning, falling, or flying, I can't tell which. It confuses me and wakes a part of me I thought was long dead and buried. A small, stupid part that bases its happiness entirely on insignificant things like Romeo knowing my favorite food.

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“DREAM THINGS TRUE”

THEN

I MET ROMEO IN August. I know that because my mom put a back-to-school countdown calendar on the fridge. Every night before bed, we stood in front of the fridge and crossed out the day that had passed. Most nights, Lexi and I fought about whose turn it was to use the pen. Or which pen to use. Or who was standing too close to the other. Most nights, my mom let her eyes flutter shut, took a deep breath, and tried not to look happy when she told us how many days of vacation we had left.

It had been a long, hot summer. Hotter and drier than usual for Michigan. I'd turned seven in June and Lexi was eleven. She'd started to find me annoying, through no fault of my own, and I'd started to find her boring because she'd become incredibly boring. She never wanted to play, and she spent all her time in her room, reading boring books or hanging out with her boring friends, yelling at me to leave her alone.

“Come on, you,” said my mom, taking me firmly by the shoulder. “You need to get out of the house. Fresh air, that’s what you need. We’ll see you in a bit, Lex,” she called upstairs. “I’m taking Jude to the park.”

“Ugh, but the park’s *boring*, and I wasn’t even in Lexi’s room. I didn’t do anything. I just put my *one* foot in a tiny bit. Just my toes. The rest of me was in the hallway.”

“He’s *trying* to be annoying!” bellowed Lexi from upstairs.

“I’m not trying to be annoying. She’s trying to be annoying,” I grumbled as my mom marched me out of the house.

There was a woman at the park, in the shade near the swings, when we got there. She was tall and slender with long dusty-blonde hair that fell to the small of her back in a tangle of loose waves. She was barefoot, her sandals kicked to one side, toes digging into the grass. I didn't notice him immediately because of how her skirt flared out, but after a second, I realized a boy was hidden behind her. Upon further investigation, I saw a black dog hidden behind the boy.

"Hi," said my mom. The boy ducked his head farther out of sight, peering out only when it became clear our mothers had struck up a robust conversation that didn't look like it would taper off anytime soon.

The boy had bushy, overlong hair the same color as his mother's and wore a midnight-blue cape that hung down to his knees. His eyes were enormous. Light swirls of blue with long eyelashes that curled up and made him look wide-eyed even though, technically, his eyes were narrowed at me. He watched me warily without speaking or making any sudden movements.

"This is Romeo," said his mom. "He's shy. It takes him a little while to warm up, but I'm sure he'd love to play." She turned to my mom. "We moved here a couple of weeks ago. We've been so busy unpacking and getting things sorted that we haven't had time to meet anyone. Some of us have been going a little stir-crazy."

Our moms started chatting about how lovely it would be when school started and everyone got back into a nice routine. Romeo and I continued eyeing each other uneasily.

"What's your dog's name?" I asked when curiosity got the better of me.

Romeo considered me, eyes tracking up and down me for so long I thought he wouldn't answer, and then whispered, "Buddy."

"Does Buddy want water?" I'd seen lots of kids with dogs take them down to the water fountain and offer them a drink, and I'd always thought it looked like an important, grown-up thing to do, so I pointed behind me. "There's a fountain over there."

Buddy's head popped out from behind Romeo and his ears pricked at the sound of his name. He started moving as soon as Romeo did. The three of us walked to the spout in silence, Buddy glued to Romeo like a shadow. I turned the faucet on and Romeo cupped his hands together and offered Buddy some water. Buddy wagged his tail, which made me want to be part of it all. I cupped my hands together and offered him water as well, and

though he paused, dipping his ears back and sniffing hesitantly before deeming me safe, he drank from my hands too.

Romeo observed silently. I could feel his gaze on my face as Buddy's tongue lapped at my palms and water ran through my fingers onto my shoes. By the time Buddy's thirst was quenched, my fate was decided.

I was in.

Romeo dried his hands on his cape and said, "Come on, let's go."

He took off toward the thicket of white oak trees near my house. He was fast. So fast I could barely keep up. As he ran, I noticed one corner of his cape was ripped.

"What happened to your cape?" I panted.

He didn't stop. "Wolf attack."

"Wolf attack?"

This time, he slowed and turned toward me. He glanced down at Buddy, eyes sparkling, and said, "Yeah. It was bad. For a while there, I wasn't sure I'd make it. The lone wolf of Alabaster got me." His cape flapped in the breeze as he turned to take off again, and that time, Buddy snapped at it, catching it between his teeth and pulling back. It hardly slowed Romeo. "To the Dark Forest!"

I followed incredulously, my interest piqued well beyond anything I'd felt all summer.

"What are we doing?" I asked when we arrived at the five straggly trees that made up the entirety of the Dark Forest.

"Foraging for food," he said as if it were obvious.

We collected dried leaves, small stones, bark, and as many acorns as we could carry. We piled them high and made repeated trips back to the fountain, running the faucet until a mud river meandered around us. We filled our water bottles and poured the contents onto the roots of the oak trees, digging up dirt with bare hands and enthusiastic assistance from a lone wolf. We molded the dirt into rounds, called them cakes, and adorned them with acorns and leaves.

Romeo's eyes flashed again. I realized the first time it happened had only been a hint. The second time, he did it with meaning.

"Would you like me to tell you a story?" he asked. And there, in my local park, on a late summer's afternoon, in the shade of a wizened white oak tree, reality faded and make-believe came to life around us.

Romeo painted with words, pictures so clear and vivid I can still see them sometimes when I'm caught in the quiet place between sleep and wakefulness. He told tales of magical creatures on crazy adventures. Mythical beasts and unlikely heroes. He wrote himself and Buddy into the story, and after a while, he wrote me in too. He found long sticks for us to use as blades and short ones as guards. He untied my laces and used them to fashion our swords. We defended our bounty and found hidden treasure, and when we were done, we set off again.

"Where to?" I cried, sword held high in one hand, a mud cake balancing precariously in the other.

Romeo cast his eye to the side of the park farthest from my house, slowing his pace and speaking in a somber, hushed tone. "To the dragon, of course."

The boulder that had always been a big, inconveniently placed rock morphed before my eyes, growing scales and a gargantuan pair of wings. "Inferno," Romeo called it. We offered the dragon the cakes we'd made—it liked them so much it almost lit Buddy on fire by accident. Once its hunger was sated, Inferno allowed us to mount it.

"Careful," warned Romeo as we clambered onto the rock, "dragons are wild. Only the brave can ride them."

Turns out, that day, we were the brave. We must have been because we rode that dragon until the sun hung low and the sky turned orange and pink.

"Home time," said my mom for the fifth time. This time, despite a chorus of complaints from Romeo and me, our mothers held firm.

"We have to go now, hon. I haven't started dinner yet and Dad will be home soon," said Romeo's mom. "We can meet up tomorrow though. We're practically neighbors." Romeo's house was directly across the park from mine. "I have Carol's number. We'll arrange something, I promise."

"Hey, Tiger," said Romeo, turning back as his mom led him home by the hand. It took me a second to realize he was talking to me. We'd played for hours, but I'd somehow forgotten to tell him my name, and he hadn't asked. I was wearing my favorite T-shirt that day, the green one with a big orange tiger and the word *Roarrrr* on the front. I loved that shirt so much that I was in a bad mood on the days it was in the laundry. By that late stage of the summer, my mom had taken to washing and drying it over night to avoid having to deal with me about it. "We ride at dawn."

His face was splattered with mud on one side and his hair was disheveled. His cape was a little more tattered than when I met him. It was twisted around his neck and hung askew, slightly lower on one side than the other.

He was a mess, that was certain. But he was heroic.

“Well, no,” said his mom as they walked toward their house. “Not at dawn, Romeo. You can ride at noon or a little later. Actually, late afternoon is probably best because it’s cooler then, but not at daw—”

“No one rides at noon, Mom. It doesn’t happen. Everyone knows that. Who have you ever heard of riding at...?” Their voices faded as they moved out of earshot.

“Goodness,” said my mom, guiding me home as best she could without getting her hands covered in mud. “What a lot of fun you’ve had.”

She took me around to the side of the house and hosed me off before letting me inside. She made me take everything but my undies off and threw my clothes into the machine along with my shoes before we went upstairs.

Lexi stood at the landing and looked down in horror, bolting to her room and slamming the door shut as I approached.

My mom drew a bath for me and helped me wash my hair, scraping her nails gently across my scalp to dislodge the dirt and dried leaves. “Goodness,” she said again as the jug of water she poured over my head ran brown.

I talked the entire time, a steady stream of “Romeo this” and “Romeo that.” She nodded and smiled as I spoke, and when I told her Romeo said that if we closed our eyes and lay under the trees, the leaves would sing us a song, she said, “Ah, I see,” and hummed softly, “Romeo is a dreamer.”

My mom was right. Romeo was a dreamer. He spun words and worlds like no one I’d ever met. We played together every day for the rest of the summer. At first, we met in the park and then at his house or mine. His pool became Neptune or lava or an underwater forest, depending on the day. Our basement was a fortress or a maze or a cave or a safe place where no one could find us.

Days dragged out and flew by. Even though I was wired and denied being tired with my last breath, for the rest of that summer, sleep dragged me under the second my head hit the pillow.

I’d never had so much fun in all my life.



My mom and I met Romeo and his mom at the gate on the first day of school. Sally, Romeo's mom, had asked for us to be put in the same class and we were all happy the principal had agreed. Despite being in the same class, that day, Romeo had the same big eyes he'd had the day I first met him, wide and wild, and his mom kept adjusting his backpack and telling him how lovely everything was going to be.

Romeo looked different at school. He had no cape for one thing, and for another, he'd gotten a haircut that was a lot more than a trim. The bushy mane of summer was gone. His shorts and T-shirt were neat and new, and he stood very straight.

"Okay, honey," said Sally, kissing Romeo's cheek and quickly wiping her lipstick off as he made a face and tried to squirm out of her grip. Her voice sounded funny, and my mom put a hand on her shoulder. "Off you go. You'll have an *lovely* day, you'll see."

I could feel the tension in Romeo as we walked. His arms and legs were stiff and he hung back, falling into my shadow and making himself smaller until I stopped moving and turned to him. When our eyes met, I leaned my head close to his and whispered something into his ear. A message, a code I knew he'd understand. A reminder that even though we were at school and things were different, I knew who he was.

"Roarrrrr!"

A slow smile crept up his face, and though he was still very straight and upright, he knew who I was too. His eyes twinkled, and he replied, "Easy, Tiger."

From that day onward, a precedent was set. Wherever one of us was, the other was too. My friends Dan, Ollie, and Lewis included Romeo right from the start. They seemed to innately sense there wasn't a choice in the matter. They seemed to understand Romeo and I came as a pair.

Looking back now, I can see that while I shared my friends with Romeo, I didn't share him with my friends. Not really. Not all of him. I didn't tell them he was magic. Or heroic.

I could have. At that time of our lives, they would've believed me, but I didn't.

Maybe even then, in the second year of elementary school, there was a part of me that thought of Romeo as mine and mine only.

Sally was right. Romeo was shy and took a while to warm up to others. He was different at school—quieter, more reserved. Big groups of people weren't easy for him. They made him uncomfortable and anxious. I'm an extrovert, so I spoke for both of us when he went quiet. I stayed close and made sure he always knew where I was. I made sure he never had to look up in class and wonder who he'd work with when a teacher told us to pair up.

It was never a question.

It was me. Always me.

At home, in the park, and in the pool, he commanded leagues and lone wolves. He created the worlds we lived in. At school, I led and he followed.

Romeo was clever. He did well academically without really trying. In truth, I think most of what we learned bored him to tears. Sally was one of those people who didn't talk to kids like they were kids. She had big discussions about important things with Romeo. She taught him things some might have thought were beyond his years, but they weren't. Not at all. Not for him. As a result, he spent a lot of time looking out the window at school, eyes vague and unfocused as daydreams whispered his name.

Now and again, teachers would bring him back to reality with a loud, "*Romeo!* Eyes on me!"

It startled him and made him turn pink all the way to his ears. It wrenched him out of his own world and brought him crashing down to ours. I hated it. It made my blood boil right from the very first time it happened. I couldn't see why teachers needed to rouse him roughly like that when a soft, whispered "*Romeo*" or a light hand on his shoulder did the job just as well.

I felt so strongly about it, in fact, that by the third grade, I decided to make it my business to school our homeroom teacher on how best to handle Romeo.

After a particularly loud "*Romeo!*" I waited in her class while the rest of my classmates filed out to the playground for recess. "Ms. Patton, you shouldn't yell '*Romeo!*' like that. It's not nice, and Romeo doesn't like it."

"Well," said Ms. Patton, clearly taken aback by the strength of my tone, "if Romeo doesn't like it, then he should come and talk to me about it."

“He doesn’t need to because he has me.”

Ms. Patton’s eyes widened, but her expression softened. “Okay, Jude, let me have it. What do you think I should do when Romeo isn’t paying attention?”

“Don’t stand far away and yell at him. It scares him. Come close and say his name quietly.”

Ms. Patton folded her arms across her chest and tilted her head to the side to get a better vantage of me. “I suppose I could try that,” she said after a while.

“And, and, also, you should try thinking about whether Romeo really needs to focus or whether you’re teaching him something he already knows because a lot of the time...”

“All right, all right, that’s quite enough. Thank you, Jude. You better head out to the playground, or you won’t have time to eat your snack.”

Buoyed by my initial success, I dispensed advice on how best to handle Romeo freely for the rest of elementary school. Sometimes it was well received, and sometimes it wasn’t. When it wasn’t, I tended to find myself in detention on account of an alleged attitude problem. On those occasions, I would, without fail, look up to see Romeo sliding into the seat beside me.

“What are you doing here?” I’d hiss. “You didn’t get detention.”

His answer was always the same. “You’re here, aren’t you?”

“THE FACE OF HEAVEN SO FINE”

Now

THE HOUSE FEELS STRANGE. The kitchen, living room, and bedrooms are almost the same as they were. Ours, but it doesn't smell like us anymore. Most of our furniture is still here, but all the photographs have been taken down. The posters that covered the entire wall behind my headboard are gone. The wall has been patched up and painted a cheery light blue. Everything is bright and clean and far neater than when we lived here. The massive, moth-eaten navy-blue sofas that permanently bore the imprint of my sprawled-out form during my teen years are gone, replaced by a beige pair that are more upright and stern than the old ones were.

My mom was right, the kitchen and bathrooms are showing signs of wear and tear. With everything else looking better, they look notably worse than they used to.

That's why I'm here. A dutiful son returning to his hometown to oversee a remodel. My presence here wasn't part of the plan. Believe me, I'd never have agreed to it in a million years if my gran hadn't taken a fall off a ladder late last week and broken her hip.

A ladder. She's eighty-two, for God's sake. What the hell was she doing climbing a ladder?

Thankfully, she'll be all right, but she's in pain and needs help taking care of herself, so my parents are staying with her while she recovers. They're supposed to be here. I'm supposed to be happily cosseted in my Manhattan apartment. I'm supposed to be in the office this week and visiting my parents in Florida for the next two. That was my plan for the summer. A

plan I was happy with. One I consented to and was looking forward to. It was exactly the same as my plan for summer last year. And the year before. And the year before that.

My parents moving to Pensacola Beach was an inadvertent blessing. When they first told me they were thinking about it, I was aghast. Us, leaving Alabaster? I thought they'd lost their minds. I couldn't think of anything that made less sense than us not living here. As it turns out, it worked out just fine. My parents leaving town was a perfect, reasonable reason for me not to come back. I haven't needed to. Our house has been rented out as an Airbnb since a couple of months after Romeo and I graduated from college.



It's late. Well, after midnight. It's been almost seven hours since I got here. Almost seven hours since I saw Romeo. My pericardium feels bruised, a tight, fibrous sac that's squeezing my heart too hard.

I didn't touch the bread or ham. I couldn't face them, but I ate an entire block of cheese and smashed one of the bottles of Cabernet in under an hour.

I don't feel well.

I'm what my dad calls "wine awake." Overstimulated. Tired but not sleepy. My head spins from booze, my stomach deeply unhappy with my food choices and letting me know all about it.

I get ready for bed, brushing my teeth, spitting in the sink, and rinsing it out meticulously. In my stupor, I look up, half expecting my mom to pop into view in the vanity mirror and say, "Good boy, Jude."

God. I'm drunk.

I should probably have eaten something other than cheese.

I'm home, and I'm drunk.

I'm home, and I saw Romeo, and he's exactly as terrible as he was the last time I saw him.

He might even be worse.

I bump my way to my room without turning the lights on and throw open the sash window facing the street. I overestimate the force it requires and send it up so hard I almost crack the glass.

“Shh,” I say to myself.

A thick fog of midsummer night air wafts in and causes the mood in the room to thicken. The park across the street is empty and quiet. Deserted. Dark except for the light of a single streetlight that causes long, eerie shadows to fan out from the swings. I take out my phone and manage to open my camera on the second attempt. I take a photograph despite the fact it feels even more stupid than usual to do so, and I save it to an unnamed folder. A folder that now holds one thousand six hundred and eighteen similar photographs.

I try not to feel anything about the size of that number.

Moira, a therapist I saw a while back, said it was okay that I do this. She said rituals are good for us and known to be healthy. Apparently, they can give us a beat. A pause. A second to catch our breath. She said rituals help bring order to chaos.

She was dead serious too. She didn’t mean it as a joke, but I found it funny as hell. I still do.

Jesus. What bullshit.

If you think anything about this little shit show is healthy, there isn’t a damn thing you won’t believe.

I slide the window down carefully and turn the lock, despite the fact there wasn’t a single home invasion or even a serious robbery in the twenty-one years I lived in Alabaster. I’m about to turn in when something catches my eye. A disturbance. A movement. A slow, smooth arc. The swing. The one on the left, near the Dogwood tree. It sways gently back and forth, the movement a careless relic left by someone dismounting before it came to a standstill.

I search the park for signs of life but find nothing.

The person I’m looking for isn’t there.

He’s closer.

Much closer. So close, he steals my breath for the second time today.

He’s on my front lawn, and he’s heaven and hell. Silver and blue, washed in moonlight. He’s wearing a white tank under a white shirt. The shirt is unbuttoned and hangs open, billowing out behind him as he moves. A black dog orbits slowly around him.

Buddy?

Buddy!

For a second, my heart lurches so hard that I almost call out.

It's madness. It's madness and booze. That's what it is. Buddy was sixteen when I left. He's been gone for years. Of course it's not Buddy.

I step back into the shadows and stop breathing, hiding, taking cover without taking my eyes off Romeo.

I can see him. He can't see me.

Moonlight glints off his face. He's the same as my house and the rest of the town. The same but different. Mouth. Nose. Jaw. All the same. Full lips quick to quirk but slow to smile. An ever so slightly Romanesque nose that brings something regal to the rest of his features. A jawline so cutting and sharp it calls into question things I know as fact.

But his eyes? Unrecognizable.

Glass-bottle blue. Pale from the moon. Hard. Glinting like fine shards of metal.

He looks up at my window and then looks down, watching thoughtfully as his dog turns in a circle, squats down, and takes a shit on my lawn.

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“O TEACH ME HOW I SHOULD FORGET”

Now

I DETACH MY TONGUE from the roof of my mouth with a dry click and swirl it around my mouth as I plead with all the gods I can think of to make my phone stop assaulting me. My pleas fall on deaf ears. In fact, as soon as that call gets sent to voicemail, another starts ringing immediately, a sustained, brutal attack on my senses that has me stumbling out of bed and frantically searching the pockets of my crumpled jeans to make it stop.

“Sam,” I say before I’ve managed to put my phone to my ear. “I’m sorry. I meant to call last night before bed. Wine. There was wine. Two bottles.” That’s true. It must be. The memory is vague and disjointed, but I distinctly remember uncorking the second bottle after Romeo let his dog shit on my lawn. “And cheese. I had all the cheese.”

“Did you see him?” Sam’s voice is soft and low, easy on the ear, but his words have a bite.

I sit heavily on the bed, head pounding so hard that I have to rest my forehead against the heel of my palm to keep myself upright and try to find something to say that will lessen the blow. I come up with nothing.

“You did, didn’t you?” There’s no accusation in his words, just a gentle resignation, but guilt and regret stab right where my throat and jaw meet. It aches as I open my mouth to speak. Sam beats me to it. “It’s okay, Jude.”

“It isn’t.”

“How was it? Seeing him, I mean.” Hope splutters and fades. “Was it...?”

“It was the same.”

The sound of his breathing rushes down the line and punches me hard in the gut, taking the closeness we've shared and forcing a wedge between us, pushing me further and further away until I'm able to lift my head on my own.

"It's still him, huh?" I can tell he's nodding his head and smiling. A sad, rueful smile. Not a smile I've seen on him before. "You told me. You warned me this would happen. You said we were a bad idea." His voice is still soft, but it's breathy and uneven too. "Most people wouldn't have done that, but you did."

"I wish I wasn't like this."

"I know." Neither of us speaks for a while. Him because he's crying, and me because I don't know what to say to a man whose heart I've just stomped on for the simple reason that no matter what I do, I can't stop loving the man I hate. "You warned me," he says eventually. "The night we met, you told me this is how it would end. You were very clear. Honest... you were honest with me."

It's true. I warn everyone who comes into my life that I'm broken. Not that it makes it any better. It doesn't. The end result is the same, the person who gets on the wrong side of my obsession with Romeo leaves in pieces.

"I shouldn't have let anything happen between us," I say. "I know what I'm like. I should have walked away."

"You tried to walk away. Have you forgotten? I wouldn't let you. I knew the risk, Jude..." There's a sharp intake of breath and a jagged exhale. "And"—he sniffs—"you were worth it."

That takes the regret, hurt, and desperation I feel and squeezes it until my eyes bulge.

There's a finality to this moment, the last few seconds of a call that end a budding relationship. There always is, but this time, it's worse than usual. This time, it's a nail in a coffin. A confirmation. A fact. A life sentence.

I'll be like this forever.

I won't ever change.

Sam is amazing. He's gorgeous and sexy. A blond, sunshine boy with a wicked wit and a smile that lights up a room. If anyone had a hope of changing me, it was him. We were friends before we were lovers, good friends for a long time before anything happened between us. I thought that might make a difference.

“I’ll see you around, okay, Jude? Just give me a minute, and I’ll reach out when I’m ready. We can still be friends.”

It’s a lie. An unwitting lie, but a lie nonetheless. Sam and I won’t stay friends. We won’t hang out again. We won’t laugh or order too much Indian takeout together like we used to. We won’t talk on the phone into the early hours or make plans to meet up. We probably won’t even run into each other.

“Sam,” I say before he hangs up. “I wish it was you instead.”

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“ROMEO, ROMEO”

THEN

IT WAS THE SUMMER Romeo and I learned that if we chugged a big enough glass of Coke, we could burp the alphabet song from A to Z. We were fifteen. Our voices had dropped a while back. Mine happened gradually, a change so slow and subtle I almost didn't notice it. It just went a little lower each day until one morning, I went down to the kitchen and greeted my mom without clearing my throat first, and she turned to me in surprise and said, “Goodness! I thought you were dad.”

It was different for Romeo. There was nothing slow or subtle about it for him. Pretty much overnight, he went hoarse and stayed that way for weeks. Sally kept threatening to take him to the doctor. Every time she mentioned it, Romeo gave me a panicked look, certain he was mere minutes from being dragged to a medical professional only to be diagnosed with a common case of balls dropping.

Each time she mentioned it, I smiled and said, “Don't worry, Sal. He'll be all right.”

And he was.

His new voice was husky and deep. It commanded attention and took me a while to work out if it suited him or not. After a few months of paying close attention, I decided it did. I got used to it. I even got used to the fact that when he spoke, I felt the sound in my belly, not in my ears like I used to.

I think it took Romeo longer to get used to his new voice. It was almost as though it startled him. Like he didn't recognize it as his own. He seemed

a little fearful of it and spoke more quietly after it changed. Not just at school. At home too. A soft, throaty purr that seemed to exist on a sound wave all its own.

There were other changes, too, and lots of them. That summer, when I wasn't with Romeo, I held down the sofa with my full body weight, eating everything I could lay my hands on and refusing to move no matter what anyone had to say about it.

"What are you going to do today, Jude?" asked my mom. "Surely you're not planning on lying around all day and doing nothing again."

"I'm not doing nothing."

"Well, it looks a lot like you're doing nothing."

"I'm *not* doing nothing," I said, curling a bicep and watching in satisfaction as it swelled and made the sleeve of my T-shirt grow snug. "I'm growing muscle."

"Oh my God, you're awful," said Lexi.

"Can you make me a sandwich? Ma? Lex? Come on, I'm dying of hunger here."

"Sure, honey." My mom sighed. "How many do you want?"

"Dunno. Just make the whole loaf, I guess. If I don't eat them all, I'll take 'em to Romeo's when I go over."

Romeo had grown up but wasn't muscular like me. He was lanky, almost as tall as me for the first time ever, and had a big complex about the size of his feet. In my opinion, it wasn't so much that his feet were too big. It was that his legs were too long and skinny. Not that I told him that. Jesus no. The last thing I needed was for him to develop a complex about anything else.

Romeo wasn't loving being fifteen. Being from a different world when you're a kid is very different from being from a different world when you're a teen. As a kid, he knew enough to try to hide it when he was around others, but as a teen, he felt the difference more keenly. He was an outsider, and he knew it.

I rang the bell when I got to his house, though I didn't need to. The door was always unlocked, and even if it hadn't been, I had my own key. I only did it so Romeo would stick his head over the balcony outside his window and yell at me. He didn't disappoint.

"What are you doing? Stop ringing the bell and get inside."

“Romeo,” I cried as his face creased in disdain, knowing full well what was coming. “Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou, Romeo?” To add a little flair to my performance, I raised the pitch of my voice and shielded my eyes with my hand, casting my gaze around his front yard as I said it.

He disappeared from view and reappeared a few seconds later, leaning over his balcony and throwing a shoe at me. I laughed and dodged it easily, so he threw the other one down too. I caught that one, sniffed it, and was about to tell him how much it stank when he said, “Wherefore means *why*, Jude, not where, okay? You’ve literally just said *why are you Romeo?* Not *where are you, Romeo?* Stop looking around like a dumbass when you say it.”

“O vanquished stars! O fairest summer day!” I’m not saying my grasp of Shakespeare was good. It wasn’t. I ad-libbed in a big way. “Romeo, Romeo, wherefore do I love thee thou doth. I mean, *whyfore* do I love thee thou doth? I bid thee to answer adieu.”

“*Adieu? Thee thou doth?* Jesus, Jude,” he said, one corner of his mouth quivering as he tried not to smile. “What’s wrong with you? Get in here before I change my mind.” He closed his window and opened it again. “And bring my shoes with you.”

I dropped his shoes on the porch as he swung the front door open and let me in.

Romeo’s house was one of my favorite places in the world. Stepping inside felt like stepping into a worn, time-weathered Renaissance painting. The walls were painted dusty blues and burnt ochre. The drapes were made from heavy, vintage velvet and most of the paintings were antique store finds complete with cracked paint and ornate gilt frames. Studies of torsos, hands, and faces that seemed to writhe if you looked at them for long enough. Sally loved beautiful things and saw beauty where most people missed it. She was one of those people who walked through life so lightly it looked like she was dancing, but she left a big mark.

I never asked her about it, and I’ve often wished I had, but my strong suspicion was that she decorated the house around Romeo. To suit him. At least, that’s what it looked like to me. Everything in the house seemed to go with him. The colors, the vibe, it was like Sally understood that he didn’t fit comfortably into the outside world, so she created a world that was perfect for him.

Romeo gave me his usual up-nod crossed with a slight snarl when he saw me. His hair had grown long like it always did over the summer, curling at the back of his neck and falling into his face, giving him an unruly curtain to skulk behind if he slouched just right.

“D’you have a good time at the lake?” I asked.

He mulled it over and said, “Not really, no. I found myself underwhelmed, to be honest.” He waved me into the house and down the hall. “Seen one big body of water, seen them all, I guess.”

I wasn’t particularly surprised by his response. Despite the fact that Glen Lake boasted translucent water and rolling dunes and was often regarded as the most beautiful lake in the whole state, at that time in our lives, Romeo was one of two things: underwhelmed or overwhelmed. And he generally reserved overwhelm for the school year.

“Brought you a sandwich,” I told him, “but I got hungry on the way over, so I ate it.”

That plunged him into the depths of despair. It didn’t take much, in those days, to do it, so that didn’t surprise me either.

“You ate my sandwich? Dammit, Jude, I haven’t had breakfast yet. Why would you do that? You know how I get when I’m hungry.”

I tried to change the subject as we tried in vain to find something decent to watch on TV, but he kept circling back to the sandwich. “What was on the sandwich?” “Did you make it, or did Carol?” “Was it the good mustard or the one I don’t like?”

He didn’t let up until I threatened to make him a sandwich myself.

“Oh, hell no. No way. You use far too much mayonnaise. There’s no way I’m eating a sandwich you made. You almost poisoned me last time.”

“Well, is your mom here then? Maybe she can make us a club,” I suggested hopefully.

Sally was the queen of snack food. While my mom’s catering focused on quantity, Sally’s was geared toward quality. She made her sandwiches with thickly sliced artisanal bread and never built one without at least four or five toppings. Finely sliced green apple, delicatessen cheeses with names I couldn’t pronounce, you name it, she’d put it on a sandwich. She used to serve them on a lap tray with a whole lot of little bowls scattered around the main plate. Each bowl contained something different. Nuts, jerky, fruit, that kind of thing.

God, I loved those little bowls. Sally once told me she used them because when Romeo was little, he hated when different types of food touched each other.

“Nah, she’s out. She has a work thing. Won’t be back till tonight.”

“Well then, the best I can do is offer you a grilled cheese.”

“Hmm, I guess I could go for a grilled cheese.”

He sat on a kitchen stool, swinging from side to side as I worked, back-seat driving my grilled cheese-making process for all he was worth.

“That slice is too thick.” “That slice is too thin.” “That’s too much cheese.”

“Romeo, come on. There’s no such thing as too much cheese. Everyone knows that.”

I took the grilled cheese off the stovetop, burning the knuckle on my thumb in the process, and served it to him along with three tiny bowls all filled with cashew nuts. I couldn’t be assed to put in the kind of effort Sally put in but felt wrong about making a snack in Romeo’s house that didn’t utilize a butt load of bowls.

“Happy now?” I asked as he took his first bite.

He chewed slowly and looked down at the tray on his lap, then he swallowed and took a sip of the homemade lemonade I’d found in the fridge. “I am, actually, yeah.”

“Whelmed?”

That amused him. Around that time, Romeo often said all he wanted was to experience *whelm* one time. He didn’t want to be over or under. He just wanted to know what the middle ground felt like.

“Almost.” He smiled when he said it.

Actually, it wasn’t a smile so much as a quirk of his top lip. Romeo did this thing where the rest of his face would remain neutral, but his lip would flare up on the right side. He’d show a flash of teeth and the slightest hint of gum. A barely-there sliver of pink that did something to me.

The lip thing wasn’t new. Romeo had done it for as long as I’d known him. He did it when he was happy. Or sad. Or angry. When he liked something. When he judged someone. He did it for lots of different reasons. He always had. What was new was that, for some reason, that summer, when he did it, I had an almost uncontrollable urge to lean in and put the tip of my tongue into the space created between his lips.

“Swim?” I suggested.

I swam a few lengths and stood chest deep in the water to cool down. It was a damn hot day. Romeo sat in the sun, skin glinting, reading a book, stopping once in a while to complain about something totally random.

His skin was pale in winter. So pale you could see blue-green tracks running up his arms if you looked hard enough. You'd think he'd be one of those people who wouldn't hold a tan because of his fair coloring, you know, one of those people who burn and turn pink and then revert right back to their original color, but you'd be wrong. Every year, his skin changed as summer wore on. It turned darker, golden, and then almost dusky. His hair did too. It stayed dark at the roots, light ash brown, but turned blond at the tips by the time August rolled around.

That day, as I watched him, I found myself thinking that Romeo was a kaleidoscope, always turning, changing colors with the season. Always different. Never static. The only thing that remained constant was his eyes. Those never changed. Dreamy glass-bottle blue that somehow managed to be light and ethereal and intense at the same time. Irises so pale that sometimes, when I saw him at a distance, he looked like an overexposed portrait someone had smudged an oil pastel across.

After a while, he put his book down and moved to the pool, sitting at the edge and dipping his feet in the water. He blew out a long sigh in three or four separate stages. I could tell what he was going to say next from the way he did it.

"Did you hear Ollie kissed Willow at the movies last night? Like properly. With tongue."

I had heard that. Ollie texted me the second he got home to tell me and then called when I didn't reply to the text fast enough.

"Is that right?"

It wasn't that I didn't like where the conversation was headed so much that I was bored of it. Romeo tended to be repetitive about things that bothered him, and he'd been bothered by this topic for well over a year. I knew exactly what I was in for. I swam another couple of lengths as he droned on about how unfair life was and how everyone except for him had been kissed.

"I haven't been kissed either," I reminded him from the deep end the third time he said it.

"Yeah, but you know that doesn't count."

“How come?” I asked to be difficult. We’d had this exact conversation so many times I knew the answer by heart.

“Because, *Jude*, tons of girls have tried to kiss you.” He raised a hand and counted off angrily on his fingers. “Allison, Carrie, Olivia Swales, Olivia Romero...”

I cut him off before he could ask the question I knew was coming next. “Too loud. Too quiet. Smells like ChapStick. And, I dunno, looks like she’d taste minty, I guess.”

“Taste minty? Smells like ChapStick? Seriously? What’s wrong with ChapStick? It smells nice.”

It wasn’t so much that there was something wrong with the way ChapStick smelled as it was that I didn’t want ChapStick that had been on a girl on me. It was hard to explain, so I didn’t bother.

“You’re messing up, Jude.” It wasn’t the first time I’d heard this either. “Seriously, you are.”

I placed both hands on the edge of the pool and hoisted myself out of the water, turning and sitting next to him as water ran off me and formed a pool around me.

Our feet were distorted by the water, looking bigger and then smaller depending on how the light hit them. We both watched them for a while, and I wondered if Romeo would start complaining about the size of his feet again. He didn’t. He moved his legs slowly as if trying not to cause a ripple in the water. As he did it, the polyester of his swim shorts made a soft, synthetic sound against mine. It was one of those things that had happened a hundred times before, but it felt different that time. Closer. Louder.

“How am I messing up?” I asked when I realized he wasn’t going to change the subject and was still waiting for me to reply.

He rolled his eyes. “I’ve told you a thousand times. Seriously, how many times do I have to explain it to you? You have the perfect opportunity here. Lots of girls like you. You could kiss a bunch of them for, for practice or whatever. That way when you meet one you like a lot, you’ll know what you’re doing. You’re lucky. You have options. I’m in deep shit here. I’m going to be twenty by the time a girl finally likes me, and I won’t know how to kiss. I’ll literally be the only twenty-year-old ever who’s never been kissed, and it will show. I’ll blow my chance. She’ll probably laugh and tell all her friends, and, and I’ll never get kissed again, and my entire life will be ruined.”

Romeo had a major tendency to catastrophize. “I’m sure your *entire* life won’t be ruined,” I teased.

His eyes flashed in annoyance. “You don’t think messing up a kiss with a girl who’s my soulmate will be a disaster?”

“Nah, you know I’m not really sold on soulmates. There’s no way there’s only one person for everyone. It’s wildly improbable. Impossible even.”

“More than one soulmate?” His mouth turned down at the corners. “Don’t be disgusting, Tiger.”

Romeo had some very fixed notions about what being soulmates involved, and I loved riling him up about it. I really loved it. I got a big kick out of hearing him talk about things like that in those days. His whole face would become animated and he’d move closer to me so I’d be in no doubt about the strength of his opinion.

He glared at me, so I caved and said, “It won’t be a disaster, Romeo.”

“It will be. Of course it will be. This is serious, Jude. My entire future happiness is at stake, and you’re making jokes. I’m falling behind. You are too, but you’re too dumb to notice.”

It was one of those times I started talking without thinking through what I was saying. It happened sometimes, but usually, I had a vague idea of what I was going to say beforehand. You know, an inkling, an idea of the direction I was headed in, at least. Not that time. That time, I didn’t have a clue. In fact, I hardly even recognized the sound of my voice when I heard it.

“I’ll kiss you.”

“DREAMERS OFTEN LIE”

Now

ROMEO’S HOUSE HAS BEEN painted since the last time I was here. It’s a stark, overbright white that looks picturesque from the street but casts a slight glare as you get closer. It’s a strong contrast to the wildness of the garden. There have been big changes since the last time I saw the garden—it was limping along, barely surviving then, but it’s thriving now. The bank of bigleaf hydrangeas has grown chest height and throws a profusion of soft pinks and pale blues along the front fence. Near the house, coral bells and daisies are punctuated by foxgloves and hollyhocks. It’s a riot of pastel colors that gives me an eerie feeling. A certainty, almost. A knowing that the person who’s been here, the person responsible for bringing this garden back from the brink, is someone who was taught to dance when others thought walking would do. Someone who was taught to tread lightly as you move through life. Someone who learned those things from his mother.

I knock twice, both times a little harder than strictly necessary, and step back. I’m armed with a fake smile, a cheap bottle of Pinot Grigio, and the worst bunch of flowers I could find in all of Alabaster. I feel worse than I’ve felt in at least three or four years, and that’s saying something. My palms are sweaty and a lumpy cocktail of every unpleasant emotion imaginable swirls in my belly.

Selby opens the door and shows me in, pausing magnanimously to give me time to take in and compliment what she’s done to the house.

It’s white. White-on-white. White on more white. Whiter than white. On top of that, she’s wearing white too. White ankle-biter jeans and a pair of very flat, thin-soled sneakers. White as well, obviously. It’s giving Baby from

Dirty Dancing. Ordinarily, it's a casual look I've always liked on women. Kind of sporty but put together also.

I can't say I love this iteration.

Her tank has a broad blue stripe that breaks up the ensemble and forces the eye down to her chest. I wonder distantly whether that's an accident. I think probably not.

"Jude!" she all but squeals, throwing herself into my arms for a quick hug, keeping her cheek turned to protect her lip gloss.

"Sorry about the flowers," I lie.

"Nonsense! They're lovely." She waves it off and looks me up and down, saying, "Oh my God. I love your two-piece. It's like, so cute."

I'm wearing a matching olive-green short-sleeved button-down shirt and shorts with a palm-leaf design paired with Italian leather loafers. It's a look that's light years from the athletic shorts and backward caps I wore when I lived in Alabaster, and it's definitely not something I'd have been comfortable being seen in before I came out.

I'll neither confirm nor deny whether I'm purposefully trying to dress flamboyantly. And I'll neither confirm nor deny whether I'm doing it with the express purpose of getting a reaction from Romeo.

And no, I won't be taking questions at this time.

"Babe!" she calls, breaking the word into three syllables, "Jude's here."

Romeo appears in the doorway that leads to the open-concept kitchen, living room, and backyard. His lips are turned up in a bright smile and his hair is neater than I've ever seen it. Short at the back and sides, slightly longer on top, parted on the side. Stick straight. Every strand contained, brushed, and styled to within an inch of its life. I doubt a strand would move out of place if he was hit by a tornado.

He's wearing white too. White shorts and a white tank with a blue shirt that hangs open. The blue of his shirt matches the stripe on Selby's almost exactly.

I swear to God, if I find out she picks out his clothes for him, I'm going to start screaming.

Mark my words, I'll do it. Don't think I won't.

The dog that looks like Buddy is at Romeo's heel, sitting and looking up at him as if his sole purpose in life is to stay as close to Romeo as possible. Romeo's hand drops down, and he scratches gently between the dog's ears, a slow, unconscious movement that sucks me back in time and spits me out again.

Selby moves us into the kitchen—white from floor to ceiling, obviously—and arranges the flowers in a vase, chattering happily as she snips off the deadheads, leaving her arrangement with no more than a handful of sad blooms in the final stage of fighting for their lives, and by the look of things, losing the battle. She scrunches her face and says, “Mm, so *nice*,” when she’s done.

Ten dollars says they’re in the trash by the time she goes to bed tonight.

“Food’s almost ready,” says Romeo. Unsurprising, given I’ve arrived a full forty-five minutes later than he asked me to.

His text got my back up. It came less than an hour after I ended the call with Sam. His name popped up on my screen and my hands started to shake before the letters even merged into something meaningful. It pissed me off.

Seven-thirty.

That pissed me off even more. *Seven-thirty*. After five years that’s what I get? That’s what I get after the last texts we sent each other? Life-altering texts I’ve re-read and re-read so many times over the years that I know them by heart. Texts that have kept me awake. Texts that broke me into so many pieces I’ve never come close to working out how to put myself back together again.

Seven fucking thirty?

He’s lucky I turned up at all.

“How’s the family?” he asks when he’s poured me a glass of much better wine than I brought.

Thank God for small mercies.

I’m still way too hungover to survive exposure to the crap I brought, but I’m not too hungover to feel the full force of my rage that he’s talking about my family as if he’s still part of it. I know he stays in touch with my mom. It bothers me, but I can’t find it in me to begrudge him that, much as I wish I could. I told my mom we fell out after the wedding and asked her never to mention his name to me again. I know it upset her, and she’s slipped up once or twice, but for the most part, she’s been good about it. “Is your gran doing okay?”

“Oh, sure,” I say, trying out a smarmy, devil-may-care voice I haven’t used before. “You know what she’s like. Unstoppable. A battle-ax that bakes cookies.”

Selby scrunches her face and emits a giggle that’s so adorable that I’m almost positive she’s practiced it in front of a mirror at some point in her life.

“She’s eighty-two. What the hell was she doing on a ladder?” Romeo asks.

“Yeah, well, that’s the million-dollar question, isn’t it,” I answer, ignoring the fact that’s exactly what I said when my mom told me what happened.

Selby takes it upon herself to turn the incident into a teaching moment. She stands a little straighter and speaks demurely. She knows things, but she doesn’t want to be a dick about it. “When my grandpa turned eighty, my dad went over to his place and took every ladder, step ladder, and power tool he owned. Yep, confiscated them all and keeps them in his own garage now. You hear too many stories like this, you know. Elderly people hurting themselves through accidents that could be avoided.”

I can’t tell if I’m wildly oversensitive or if I actually am under thinly veiled attack. Out of pure habit, I glance at Romeo to see his take on the matter.

His face is unreadable. A stony mask that’s pristine and perfect, porcelain that’s been painted on and gives nothing away. I drain my glass in a couple of large gulps and top it up generously without waiting for Selby or Romeo to offer to do it. While I’m at it, I fill his glass and hers, too, though a little more sparingly.

Conversation between Romeo and me is stilted, but it hardly seems to matter. Selby talks enough for the three of us. Though I don’t remember asking, she gives me a full rundown of the changes they’ve made to the house. “Of course it was *lovely* before.” Four syllables, maybe five. “It was *beautiful*.” Five syllables, for sure. “It’s just that it wasn’t *our* taste, you know?”

“Mm.” I smile and nod. “Not your taste?” I’ve realized that if I paraphrase what she says, I can keep the conversation going without exerting more strenuous effort.

Romeo’s face remains impassive, but something menacing glints in his eyes. Glass. No, metal. It takes me a while to piece it together because his reactions are so microscopic that initially, even I don’t pick up on them. But I soon realize that while to the casual observer, it looks like we are three old friends sitting around a table, eating fajitas in a room that would photograph well for an app like Instagram but feels clinical as hell in real life, Romeo and I are sparring. We’re fencing. Fighting. And our swords aren’t made of sticks. We’re playing with steel. We’re swinging hand-forged weapons with razor-sharp blades.

Every time I speak, he cuts me. Shallow cuts at first. Just papercuts, really, but they sting more than they should. I strike back harder, cutting deeper.

“What happened to all the art?” I ask Selby, bracing and lunging. Romeo’s top lip stiffens. He anticipates my attack and raises his guard.

“Oh, the art is so special to us. We kept all of it, didn’t we, Rome? I had a contractor come over and crate the paintings individually for safekeeping. They’re all in the garage.”

Our eyes meet. Metal strikes metal. Sparks fly.

“Ah,” I say, “safekeeping? That’s nice.”

The conversation has ground to a halt, but it’s no matter. Selby turns to Romeo and changes the subject completely.

“Doesn’t Jude look great?”

I look at Romeo, advancing as I wait for him to confirm or deny it. I swing and parry. Feinting at the last minute. He winces. It’s barely there, just a hint, but I see it, a fine hairline fracture in his mask.

He pivots and blocks, opening his mouth to speak, but it’s too late. Selby beats him to it, resting a hand lightly on his shoulder, subtly letting him know she still has the floor.

“Don’t you think he looks wonderful? A glow-up, that’s what you’ve had, Jude. Honestly, I took a second to recognize you yesterday. No, not a glow-up. A gay-up.” She laughs so hard at her joke that a full set of bottom molars is exposed. When I don’t laugh nearly as loudly, she looks at Romeo. “Can I say that or not?”

“You can, but why would you?” Romeo manages to sound bored, seething, and mild-mannered simultaneously.

He’s only one of those things, I can assure you of that. And it’s not bored or mild-mannered.

It’s no matter. Selby powers on undeterred. “I just *love* your little two-piece,” she says, crinkling her eyes at the corners. “It’s adorable, isn’t it, Rome? *Super* cute. I mean, you were always a hottie, Jude. I’m not saying you weren’t or anything. You definitely were. D’you know that Olivia Romero cried when you came out?” Her eyes dance with menace or mirth. I can’t tell which. “I can really tell you’ve been working out.”

As a matter of fact, I have been. I’ve worked out five times per week for the past five years in an attempt to stave off crippling depression, and I’ve learned how to dress from friends who are stylists to people with more money than sense. I earn a good living, and since my life doesn’t have much meaning anyway, I spend it on myself. I go to a barber on the Upper East Side who plays scratchy jazz and pours me a single malt whiskey while I wait. I’ve been going there for so long that I’m able to lie back and let him put green

goo all over my face without breaking into a sweat. I know he'll wipe it off with a hot towel before I leave and my skin will glow for days. I'm at least ninety percent confident he won't accidentally slice through my jugular when he uses the straight razor on my neck, and while I do still flinch when he waxes my brows and nose, I don't jump nearly as high as I used to. And I don't squeal at all anymore.

So, I guess you *could* say I've had a gay-up.

Romeo strikes. To the uneducated eye, it's merely a dismissive shrug. It's neither a yes nor a no. It's an action that hardly matters. That hardly happened. To me, it's a hard strike that makes contact and draws blood.

It's not the response Selby expected, and she's not happy about it. She's entertaining, for God's sake. She has company, and the last thing she needs is her husband choosing this moment to be weird. She gives Romeo a pointed stare and attempts to rectify things. "Well, Sam's a lucky guy. That's all I can say."

Sam's a lucky guy?

Sam? Sam?

How the fuck does she know about Sam?

I'm winded. Wounded. Fragments of our years apart splinter and fall into place. It happens slowly and then fast as it dawns on me. Romeo hasn't simply not told Selby that we fell out. It's worse than that. Much worse. Or better, depending on how much you like drama. He's kept in touch. One-sided, of course, but still, he's kept up with my life. He's been asking my mother or Lexi about me. No, not Lexi. She would have told me. He's been asking my mother. Or he's been stalking my socials.

Yeah, that's what he's been doing. Stalking my socials.

He has too much pride to ask my mother about me, the fucker.

He's been following me. Watching from the sideline as I wither away.

"Oop," says Selby when the alarm on her phone sounds. "Dessert's ready." Romeo starts getting to his feet, a feigned attempt to help her clear our plates when really, he's trying to get as far away from me as possible. Selby won't have a bar of it. "No, no, you sit, babe. You two catch up. I've got this."

When she's out of sight, Romeo crosses his arms and looks away from me.

The fucking asshole.

Is he really going to sit here and ignore me? Not on my watch.

"So, the two of you really like white, huh?" Is it mature of me? No. Do I care? Also no.

“What?” He turns his head and fixes me with a blistering gaze. “You don’t like white?”

“Can’t say I do, no.” We’re still sparring, but we’re not fighting with blades anymore. We’ve devolved to sticks tied together with laces.

“Oh. Well, I can’t say I like your two-piece.”

Dry, brittle twigs crash together. Tiny bits of bark fly into the air and get in my eyes.

“Hate your hair,” I hiss softly so Selby can’t hear us if she’s on her way back. “*Hate* it. It doesn’t suit you.”

The dining room door opens and the dog bounds in. Selby must be trying to keep it in the kitchen to prevent it from begging because she follows at pace, glares at the dog, and gives Romeo a long look that speaks at least two full sentences. Neither of them polite.

I sense an attack on Romeo and muscle memory kicks in despite the fact I actively try not to let it. I call the dog over to me with a pat of a hand against my thigh before Selby can have Romeo take it out. It approaches with caution. Up close, it’s bigger than Buddy was, but like him, it’s one of those dogs that looks like a drawing a child would do of a dog. You know, long nose and pointy ears that stick up like triangles on its head. A mixed breed with at least some German Shepard in the equation. It’s black from head to toe, with a whippy tail currently hanging down. The dog is hesitant, approaching slowly, but I can tell from its eyes it isn’t scared. It’s cautious but unafraid. Why would it be? Its master is near.

“What’s his name?” I ask.

Selby gives Romeo a millisecond to reply, and when he doesn’t answer in the time she’s allotted, she speaks for him.

“His name’s Tiger.” She gives me a warning look, stretching her eyes and talking quietly, overmouthing her words as if that will somehow make it impossible for Romeo to hear her. “He’s a bit bitey, so be careful...”

I don’t hear the rest. My brain has cut out.

Tiger. He named his dog Tiger.

Romeo named his dog after me.

Romeo’s mask slips. His eyes do that thing where it looks like they’ve widened, but they’ve actually narrowed. They’re his though. Not glass. Not porcelain. His. A pale, panicked blue smudge spreads across the upper quadrant of his face and shows me a glimpse of alternate worlds and faraway galaxies.

Stories and daydreams.

A hero and a lone wolf.

“That’s an unusual name for a dog,” I manage eventually.

“I know,” Selby agrees, “but you know what Romeo’s like. Gets an idea in his head and won’t be talked out of it.” She laughs as though she finds the trait endearing, but the pitch is a little off. She titters again and lowers her chin conspiratorially. “Tiger’s a bit of a problem, to be honest. We’re *dying* to start a family, and I’m not sure he’ll be safe around babies.” She gives me a long, meaningful look designed to get me on her side. “Not really sure what to do about it, are we, Rome?”

As Romeo scrabbles with his mask, twisting and turning it before getting it back into place, I realize with disbelief that quickly turns into horror that Selby is a threat to Tiger’s continued presence in Romeo’s life. Disgust so strong it tastes bitter rises in my throat. I match my smile with hers, and even though I hate him, even though he hurt more than I thought anyone could ever hurt me, I made a vow once, an oath I can’t take back no matter how much I wish I could—protecting Romeo when he’s under attack isn’t a choice.

“Ah,” I say lightly, “guess you’ll just have to wait ten or twelve years until he dies of natural causes, won’t you?”

Selby looks like she’s bitten into a wasp. She falters but quickly corrects. “Oh, you!” She laughs. “Trust you to take Romeo’s side. You two were always like that.”

I laugh a little too loudly and take a large sip of wine. I set the glass down carefully, nudging it twice to ensure I’m completely happy with its placement before I’m able to summon the courage I need to look at Romeo.

He’s dropped his sword. It lies at his feet, out of reach. Mine’s still in my hand, but it hangs limply at my side, and when I look into Romeo’s eyes, it slips from my fingers and clatters to the floor beside his. Romeo is sitting completely still. The low light from the candles on the table flickers and warms his skin, bringing it back to life. His hands are folded loosely in his lap, palms up. Long fingers. Deep nail beds. The mask he’s been wearing rests gently in them.

He looks naked and real, and unreal, and so unspeakably beautiful I can’t breathe in or out.

It’s him.

Romeo.

My Romeo. My friend. My lover.

My life.

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“THUS WITH A KISS I DIE”

THEN

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN you’ll kiss me?” Romeo’s eyes were slanted with suspicion, and he shook his head as if he understood all too well I was joking at his expense. “No, you fucking won’t. Why would you do that?”

“I’m serious, Romeo, I will.” He blinked twice in rapid succession, lips parting in disbelief as I doubled down. “I’ll one hundred percent do it. I’ll kiss you for sure if it gets you to stop talking about it.”

My voice was my own again. Largely. It was still a little tinny, but it was mainly mine. My heartbeat had grown fast and loud, hammering so hard I could feel it punching my ribs.

Romeo kicked his legs in the water, not minding if he caused a splash now. Right one and then left. As he did it, his knee grazed mine, and he didn’t move it. He kept it there. Burning me as I tried to remember how to think. His eyes were on mine. Clear and crystalline without a ripple in sight.

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah.” My voice gave an uncharacteristic crack. “Dead serious. You can practice on me as much as you like, but only if you swear not to bring up this kissing soulmate crap again.”

His pupils shrank and dilated. “And you won’t...you won’t tell anyone?”

I gave him a long, pointed scowl. Romeo and I were on the same side. We didn’t need to ask each other not to tell. Neither of us would ever tell anything. Big or small. That had been established years ago. We had each other’s backs. He was my ride-or-die, and I was his.

I could almost see the cogs of his mind turning. Calculating. Considering. His tongue peeked out between his lips, leaving the bottom one glistening where the sun hit it, and then he dipped his head slightly—down and then up—without breaking eye contact with me.

I couldn't believe it. I was shocked to my core and instantly hit by a wave of euphoria so big and intense my brain cut out right then and there.

In retrospect, I should have waited. I should have paused, at least. I should have taken a second or two to consider what I'd offered to do or at least considered the implications of kissing your best friend.

I didn't.

I leaned in, heart hammering in my throat, and pressed my lips against his. It was light. Tentative. A barely-there touch. A soft touch that caused a nuclear reaction. The force of it entered through my mouth, traveled through bone and brain matter, and hit me square in the back of my skull.

I parted my lips without thinking, acting on instinct where experience failed me, darting my tongue into Romeo's mouth and finding his. The same current from before flowed down to my toes and rushed back up so hard and fast that my eyes flew open and my hands flexed, letting go of the edge I'd been clinging to.

My entire body erupted in heat.

My *entire* body.

I panicked and pushed myself off the edge and into the water so Romeo wouldn't see how he'd affected me. I waded a few steps away toward the deep end, a big shithead grin spreading over my face as I tried to think of something cool to say. As I wrestled with that, Romeo dove into the water, the long, sleek line of him asphyxiating me as he closed in. He surfaced, sending water flying in ten different directions. His eyes were closed, his head tilted back as he emerged from the water. His hair was dark and had fallen back off his face. A sheet of water ran off him, a translucent cape, and God, he looked heroic. A vision of eyelashes and cheekbones and soft, full lips. Taut skin wrapped tightly around a suggestion of muscle.

He opened his eyes lazily and smiled at me. It wasn't a quirk. There was nothing lopsided about it. It was a rare, full constellation. A smile I knew well. A smile he kept just for me. A smile for when he was at home and we were alone. For when he led and I followed. I smiled back when I saw it. I couldn't help it. I loved that smile. At that point in my life, smiling back

when Romeo smiled at me was the most normal thing in the world. It was involuntary, a reflex more than a conscious decision.

He gave me no warning. He simply took my head in his hands and held on firmly. He leaned to one side, still smiling, and pulled me toward him. This time, there was nothing fleeting about it. Nothing furtive or even unsure. Romeo opened my mouth with his tongue and took what he wanted.

A kiss.

A first kiss. A last kiss. The only kiss that ever existed.

He was slow and sensual about it. Unhurried. He held me in place and practiced on me. He played with my tongue and my lips. Nipping and licking. Soft, shallow kisses and hard, deep ones too. Learning. Exploring. Seeing how it felt when he did this and how it felt when he did that.

For my part, I let him.

God, I let him.

My arms found their way around his waist. His skin was cold, wet, and hot, and I couldn't move or think or even feel where I wasn't touching him. My head was above water, but I was drowning. Weightless. Floating, with no air in my lungs and nothing but Romeo to stop me from drifting off into space.

I didn't realize it then, but that day in the pool was the first time he carved his name into my heart. He did it deeply. Deep enough to leave a fine, silvery thread of scar tissue. I didn't mind or complain. Not at all. Hell, I cracked my own sternum and held my ribcage wide open, giving him the time and access he needed to cut as deeply as he wanted. I didn't wince. I didn't flinch or pull away. I stood still.

I was such a dumbass, I looked on and



A few weeks later, at school, Romeo was telling the guys that he'd made out with someone over the summer.

"Yeah, right," said Dan. "Like hell you did."

"I did!" Romeo replied with force. "Ask Jude. He was there."

“It’s true,” I said, taking care to arrange my face right, though I could feel the corners of my mouth doing something weird. “He kissed a girl.”

“Oh yeah? What was her name?”

“Juliet,” Romeo and I said in near-perfect, unplanned unison.

“Ugh, you two are shitting me,” said Dan.

“We aren’t. It’s true. That’s how we got to talking. She found out my name is Romeo, and the rest, as they say, is history. She couldn’t recite a sonnet for shit, but she tried. It was actually pretty cute.” His lips parted in the tiniest hint of a grin. A little crack that let a memory seep through. “She was brunette with these big, dark eyes.” He flicked his gaze at me, paralyzing me briefly. “She was beautiful.”

And that was the second time he carved his name on my heart.

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“POISON HATH RESIDENCE”

Now

I'M ON THE FLOOR in my room, sitting directly under the window that faces the park. The light is out, but the curtains are open. I can't tell if I feel sick from the two helpings of overly sweet cheesecake I let Selby serve me or the shock of seeing Romeo in a house that looks nothing like his home with a dog that looks like Buddy but isn't and a lover who isn't me at his side.

I keep my face forward and shift my hips so I'm able to scoot my hands under my ass cheeks and sit on them.

I will not open the window.

I will not look out the window.

I will not wait for Romeo.

Fine, maybe I will wait for him, but I will not let him see me waiting for him and the window will stay closed. I will not open the window. I'd rather die.

A long beam of moonlight enters my window, casting a ghostly blue light on my bed. I sit and sit and sit, watching as the light slowly moves in a broad arc across my bed and my fingers throb and finally go numb.

I stay like that for ages, hours. My mind races, darting from the past to the present. From Romeo now to Romeo then. His face. His eyes. I don't move until I'm shivering, despite the fact it's late June and the weather is balmy.

It's passed midnight, well into the early hours, when I finally accept defeat and raise a gnarled, cramping hand over my head and fumble with

the window latch. I'm so weak and defeated by the time I do it that it takes both hands and my last reserve of energy to push the window open a crack.

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“UNDER LOVE’S HEAVY BURDEN DO I SINK”

THEN

IT WAS OUR JUNIOR year of high school. It had started to feel like maybe school would never end. Like life in Alabaster would never end. Like nothing major would ever happen or change and our lives would be the way they’d always been forever. That year, Romeo and I took to climbing out our windows and meeting in the park at night. Looking back, I have no idea why we found it necessary to sneak out. Our parents were cool. They’d probably would have let us go if we’d asked, especially since we usually didn’t do it on school nights. Sally probably would have packed us a little picnic, and my mom would have chased after me with a sweater and not been satisfied until she saw me put it on, but I’m pretty sure they wouldn’t have minded or tried to stop us.

Anyway, for some reason, we did sneak out. I guess the clandestine nature made it more fun. We’d meet at Inferno, climb onto the rock, and lie back and look at the stars. Romeo wore eighties band T-shirts in those days, with faded flannel shirts he left hanging open. Sometimes, when he wasn’t looking, I’d take hold of the hem of his shirt and rub it between my forefinger and thumb. On still nights, we’d lie there, and I’d feel the delicate mass of Romeo beside me even though we weren’t touching. And if we kept still and stayed quiet for long enough, magic would rain down on us, and I’d start feeling like I really was flying.

The stories he told me had changed by then. Sometimes, they were still set in make-believe worlds, but mostly, they were set in the future.

“We’re going to get out of here, Jude,” Romeo would say. “You and me, we’re going to see things. This won’t be our life forever. Things are going to

happen to us. Crazy, big, beautiful things. You'll see."

I smiled when he said it, closing my eyes as he started talking and images of the two of us with backpacks and messy hair, derelict French châteaux, and long, dusty Tuscan driveways danced across the night sky.

"And when we've done and seen things, we'll move to New York. We'll have an apartment with exposed brick walls and one of those cool, industrial-style kitchens."

"Mm-hmm." I let my head roll to the side so I was facing him. He was still looking up, so I let my gaze trace his profile, running slowly down his forehead and nose, pausing and losing my train of thought when I got to the curve of his lips. "And how are we going to afford all this? D'you know how expensive shit like traveling in Europe and rent in New York is?"

"Fine, we'll have a *small* apartment in New York. A tiny apartment, with one brick wall, an industrial-style kitchenette, and nothing but a box of granola bars *with* raisins in the cabinets." Neither Romeo nor I ate raisins. Him, because he thought they looked like dead flies when he was a kid and had never managed to get over it. Me, because I thought the sun shone out of Romeo's ass and sometimes copied him to give myself a little taste of what my life would be like if I were him.

By then, I was aware that I loved Romeo, and in an abstract way, I might even have been aware that I was in love with him, but there was no anguish associated with the emotion. I had no fear of losing him or of him ever loving anyone more than he loved me. I didn't think either of those things were possible, so they never entered my mind. Romeo and I spent every waking moment together. When we weren't at school together, we were at his house or mine or somewhere in town, looking for something to do that we hadn't done a million times before.

To me, loving Romeo was natural and easy, like breathing. It made as much sense as it did for the sun to come up in the morning. It seemed unavoidable. Inevitable. Eternal.

Yes, to me, loving Romeo seemed eternal.

I'd kissed enough girls by then that I'd started thinking maybe kissing girls wasn't my thing, and by spring that year, Romeo finally kissed a girl too. Riley Laker, from two towns away. We were at Ollie's house watching a movie. His parents were away that weekend. The lights were out and popcorn was strewn all over the carpet, but no one was watching the movie. Dan was there, too, and we all started hooting and hollering when Romeo leaned in. I'd given him a pep talk beforehand and told him I knew he could do it, and hand

on heart, I felt nothing but pride as I watched him kiss her. I walked him home that night with my arm draped around his shoulder, like always. He was talking about Riley and the kiss, and I was laughing and slapping his back, safe and secure in the knowledge that no girl and no kiss could ever come close to what Romeo and I had.

A few weeks later, life turned on its side. It was the last week of school before the summer vacation began. It was a strange, bad time. Confusing, like being woken halfway through a long hibernation. The words no one ever wants to hear had landed on Romeo's doorstep.

"Sally has cancer."

Before my mom told me, she sat me down on one of the navy-blue sofas and gave me a glass of water. I saw her lips moving and heard the words, but it was as though they were unable to penetrate. Like they got lost in translation somewhere between my mom and me. They rang in my ears as I ran through the park to Romeo's house. I ran in that too-fast, scared way that makes your lungs burn. I was winded when I got to him, panting and trying frantically to steady my breathing as panic rose in my body. Romeo was on the front step, sitting with his knees bent, drawing in the dirt with a stick. He looked up before I got to the gate, like he'd been waiting for me.

When he saw me he held out his forefinger and pointed to me. His face was hard and serious. Harder and more serious than I'd ever seen it. It stopped me dead in my tracks.

"No," he said calmly, reading my thoughts and answering as if I'd spoken aloud. "This isn't that. She's going to be fine."

He said it with such certainty that my spine caved and I doubled over. I took two deep breaths, and when I straightened, everything was better. Everything was fine. It was all going to be fine. Romeo and his dad, Mike, had taken the same stance on cancer. It could fuck off. It chose the wrong person. Mike even ordered a cap that said something to that effect for him and Romeo, and when I complimented him on it, he ordered one for me too.

It was all going to be fine. Sally had a lump in her breast that needed surgery, and she was going to have a course of chemo after she recovered to make sure the cancer didn't come back, but they'd caught it early and it was a treatable form of cancer. It wasn't great, no cancer is, and it was going to be hard, but it was going to be fine.

Sally was going to be fine.

The morning of her surgery, my family and a few of our neighbors formed a line on both sides of Romeo's street, holding up signs and balloons that had

things like *You Rock, Sal* and *Get Well Soon* written on them for Sally to read as Mike drove her to the hospital. When he got to us, Mike stopped the car and Romeo got out. Romeo, Mike, and I were all wearing our Fuck Cancer caps. Sal got out too. She hugged my mom first and then me.

“Love you, Sal,” I said before I let go.

She pulled away, cocking her head so she could get a good look at me, and said, “I love you too, Jude.”

I must have visited that memory a thousand times over the years, looking for something. A knowing. A foretelling. Some clue that she knew what was coming. I never found it. Her eyes were clear. Powder blue. At least two shades lighter than Romeo’s and dreamy in a totally different way. They carried a message for me. The same message as always. A message that didn’t need to be said in words.

Look after Romeo.

“Course I will,” I whispered. “Always.”

Romeo and I walked to school together that day, like any other day. We had double math, which was a drag, but we all agreed it would be better for Romeo to be busy at school than sitting in a hospital waiting room for hours and hours. In the last period, his name was called on the intercom, and he was asked to go to the office. We were expecting the call, so we didn’t think anything of it. I squeezed his shoulder as he packed his things and told him I’d come over later.

I didn’t think anything was wrong until I saw my mom in the parking lot waiting for me. She fetched me sometimes if the weather was bad or we had somewhere to be, but usually, because we lived so close, I walked or biked to and from school. Her waiting for me wasn’t the thing that made my blood run cold though. It was the fact she had her sunglasses on, and when I got closer, I noticed her knuckles were white from how hard she was gripping the steering wheel.

I’d never felt horror before. I thought I had, but I hadn’t. Not really. I’d never felt the kind of dread that makes your limbs heavy and your reactions slow, but I felt it when I saw my mom in the car, and I felt it again, even worse, when we got home and I saw my dad. He was crying. His eyes were red in a way that looked so wrong it almost looked violent.

I’d never seen my dad cry before.

It was one of those things that wasn’t supposed to happen. You know, one of those things you hear about, but they don’t happen to real people and definitely not to people you know and love.

It was twice as rare as getting hit by a car while walking your dog.

An allergic reaction to anesthesia.

Sally went to sleep and didn't wake up.

A low, ringing sound screeched in my brain as the words landed, and I couldn't swallow. My hands felt hot and my face felt cold. For the longest time, I didn't move or react. I watched my parents moving around me like they were skating on rails. My mom fetched tissues. My dad blew his nose. The sound was so loud I started to shake.

"Romeo," I said after I don't know how long. "*Romeo.*" As I said it, time started to speed up. There was an urgency, a franticness. I needed to get to him. I needed to be with him. "*Romeo!*"

It took both my parents to hold me back. Two sets of arms. Two faces and two voices saying the same thing.

"Wait, baby, wait. You're very upset. You're in shock. You won't be able to help Romeo now. He's with his dad. They're at the hospital. Sal's mom and sister are on their way. You can see him tomorrow." There were hands on my face and hands on my back. "You can see him tomorrow."

I locked myself in my room and paced from the door to the bed. I must have done it for hours. I had my phone in my hand the whole time, checking incessantly for messages from Romeo.

I didn't know what to say or where to start. Eventually, out of desperation, I sent him a message.

My window is open

I don't know what time it was when he came, but it was late. Or rather, it was early. I was in bed, but I hadn't fallen asleep. I couldn't. I heard his footsteps on the flat roof of the garage and a soft crash as he pushed my window open fully. His silhouette was ink black, a carbon cutout of my Romeo with a wall of moonlight behind him.

I opened the covers and he got into my bed with his shoes on. Grief clung to his clothes and his hair. It was everywhere. I wrapped my arms around him and pulled him close. I held on as tightly as I could as Romeo's tears ran down my neck and onto my chest.

His cry was ragged and broken. Great, wracking sobs followed by alternating splinters of the voices he had as a boy and then as a teen. His words were garbled and mostly inaudible, but when I could make them out, he said the same thing over and over.

"I want my mom."

If there were any parts of me that didn't already love Romeo, they died that night.

For the rest of that summer and well into the next school year, I sent him the same text every night before I went to sleep.

My window is open.

He didn't come over every night, but he came often. After that first time, he took his shoes off before he got into my bed. I don't remember him setting an alarm or anything like that, but he was always gone by the time I woke up in the morning.

My family had planned to go to Florida that year for Thanksgiving. The plan had been made before Sally died, and I'd been looking forward to it for ages. My parents had to physically wrangle me to get in the car. I invited Romeo, obviously, but he didn't want to leave his dad alone over the holidays.

"Come on, honey," said my mom. "It won't be so bad, and I think you could use a little break."

I almost blacked out from rage when she said it. *I could use a break?* What about Romeo? He was the one who was hurt, and I was being dragged off for a vacation. For a holiday. I was furious. I was as sullen and difficult as only a seventeen-year-old boy could be for the entire journey and then some.

It wasn't until I got into the too-small twin bed in my gran's guestroom that night and saw a message from Romeo that anything felt close to normal again.

Is your window open?

I couldn't help smiling. It was ridiculous, and it was Romeo.

I was more than a thousand miles from Alabaster, and there was no way in hell he could come over, but I got out of bed anyway, threw my window open wide, took a photograph of it, and sent it to him along with a single word. It was a word I meant with my whole heart and soul. A word that was more than a word. A word that was a vow. An oath.

Always

“BE BUT SWORN MY LOVE”

Now

THE THING ABOUT MAKING oaths when you're seventeen and dumber than a box full of rocks is that sometimes they can't be undone. That's the only way I can explain what happened to me. I see other people falling in and out of love all the time. Other than the fact I threw oaths around like confetti as a teen, I have no idea how to explain why I fell in love and can't fall out of it no matter what I do.

It's Monday, and the construction workers are here. Demo day, they call it. It's louder and messier than I thought it would be. It's upsetting in a way I'm not at all prepared for. Men with big hands and mud-caked boots trudge through our house in a steady stream. Kitchen cabinets are smashed onto the floor and the island is hacked apart and carried out of the house in pieces.

My dumbass can't seem to stop being underfoot, moving here and then there but still somehow managing to be in the way. I'm stricken, using all my power to block out the memories that come flooding back as our home is slowly dismantled.

Romeo used to sit on the kitchen island. When we were kids, he always sat on it. Not at it, *on* it. My mom used to roll her eyes and give a little shake of her head when he did it. If I'd done it, she'd have told me off, but she never asked him to get down. Not once. He sat on it after school most days while waiting for one of us to make him something to eat.

He sat on it the day he first fucked me. He swung his legs back and forth and watched me make nachos for him. My legs were shaking so badly from

what we'd done that there was a persistent tap of the hem of my jeans against my ankles as I moved around the kitchen. My heart raced for hours after he left. I was so happy I felt close to bursting. Like nothing could hurt me. Like Romeo was right and life really was a dream.

The vanity unit from the downstairs guest bathroom comes out next. There's a short but loud altercation between the timber and a man with a hammer. The hammer wins out. It only takes one man to carry it out. He hoists it over his shoulder and calls out a gruff warning as he barrels through the house before tossing it into the pile of debris in our driveway.

Romeo and I used to cram ourselves into the downstairs bathroom to clean up the summer I thought would never end. We used to laugh at each other when we made eye contact in the mirror and Romeo would flick little drops of water in my face after he'd washed his hands. I used to lean against the wall and use every ounce of my self-control not to grab him and force my tongue in his mouth when he did it.

By the time the workers leave for the day, I feel like a punching bag at one of those gyms that offers mixed martial arts classes to women in their forties who've decided to take their power back. Pummeled and bruised, with the unholy shit kicked out of me. I'm not sure how it happened, but I somehow managed not to give a single second of thought to the fact that by coming to Alabaster to oversee a renovation, I'd actually be living through a renovation.

Fuck.

It's a mess. My nose is blocked and my eyes are streaming. There's sawdust and bits of plaster everywhere. Gaping holes in the floor where the plumbing used to be and deep, jagged scars on the walls. I now recall my mom saying I'd need to plan alternate accommodation for at least a week or ten days. She mentioned it several times, but for some reason, I thought she was overreacting. I wrongly assumed they'd stagger doing the bathrooms, and I'd get by ordering in or going out.

"Hey, neighbor!" chimes a high voice I feel in my back teeth. Selby lets herself in and picks her way around the perimeter of the destruction, clicking her tongue in disapproval. "Mmph, they should have done a much better job of cleaning up. You'll have to speak to the site manager tomorrow, Jude. This is unacceptable. It's a matter of health and safety as well as common decency."

Her jaw is set, lips in a straight line. I can tell she won't take no for an answer, so I say, "All right," despite knowing I'd cheerfully rather eat one of my own shoes, without the benefit of ketchup or mayonnaise, than complain about something like this.

"I'll send Romeo over to help you with your things when he gets home."

"Wha—"

"Oh, it's no problem. I'd already made the guest room up for your parents when we thought they were coming. It's no bother at all. And I had Romeo meal prep last week."

Fuck. This day can't get any worse. As if being in Alabaster and seeing Romeo again wasn't more than enough, I've just landed the role of sleep-over houseguest in the home the man I love—and hate—shares with his wife.

Jesus.

A while later, a long, forced sigh announces Romeo's presence. I turn from my post, surveying what used to be the kitchen, to see him in the doorway. Long and lanky, he has a hand in one pocket, his torso slightly curved with a tight look of fury on his face. Tiger sits at his heel and looks up adoringly at him.

"I was told to come and help you with your things," he says.

I swing my backpack over my shoulder and motion for him to take my duffel. That thing weighs a ton. He lifts it, pretending not to notice the weight, and walks ahead without looking back as I fumble to lock the front door.

Tiger starts orbiting around us as soon as we get to the park. Tail up, whipping behind him as he bounds a few yards ahead before dashing back. Despite himself, Romeo smiles when Tiger drops a stick at his feet. He puts my bag down and throws the stick a few times for Tiger to retrieve. There's something so familiar about this place and this simple interaction that I feel myself slipping through the crack between the past and the present. I struggle to get out as fast as I can, but I'm not fast enough because when I look past the fountain toward the boulder near his house, I hear myself say, "Remember Inferno?"

He turns to me, eyes pale and lifeless, and says, "It was just a rock, Jude."

"*Fuck you, Romeo.*" The words come from my sternum and leave me with a force that startles me. It catches me off guard. I hadn't intended to say anything, much less anything like that.

He cocks a hip in my direction and considers me. My fists are clenched, chin drawn low. When I spoke, I spun around involuntarily to face him head-on. He hasn't moved. Neither have I.

There's a dull glint. Then, a slight flicker that turns into a flame. Fire and life burst from his eyes, changing his demeanor, his posture, and even the aura around him. He leans forward, pressing his lips together and parting them with a slow, seductive smile as his gaze dips from my eyes to my throat and settles on my lips.

"Fuck you too."

He says the word carefully, like he can taste it. Like he likes it. Like he remembers who he is and who I am, the same way I remember it.

His body arcs as he whips his arm around in a wide curve and throws the stick for Tiger again, then he leans down, scoops up my duffel, and walks to his house.

My spinal cord trembles the entire time we're at the table eating our dinner. Selby talks almost nonstop about people I don't know. Now and again, she reaches over and smooths Romeo's hair. She does it casually, without really thinking about it. She does it as if he's hers. Maybe because he legally is. I look away when it happens, but I feel whatever it is that keeps my soul glued to my body coming unstuck.

The quiver in my spine doesn't stop when we settle in to watch TV after the meal. If anything, it gets worse, even though Romeo and I sit on opposite sides of the big, U-shaped sofa, as far as possible from each other.

The flame in his eyes doesn't die out either.

It's three or four in the morning when I hear footsteps at my door. The guest bedroom they've put me in is downstairs. Romeo and Selby's room is upstairs. My breathing hitches as I wait for a knock with my heart in a spasm, but the steps don't pause. They pad past my room and head to the kitchen. I've been awake for hours despite the fact Romeo's guest room is about as comfortable as your average five-star hotel room. Against my better judgment, I get out of bed and walk barefoot to the kitchen. I take care to tread lightly so if Selby is the other person awake, I can backtrack and feign a trip to the bathroom.

It's not Selby. It's Romeo.

The fridge door is open, and he's leaning down, getting something out of it. I blink. The light from the fridge is overbright in the dark room, lighting one side of Romeo's body and casting spindly shadows around the room.

He straightens slowly as if aware of my presence without looking back. He's wearing a pair of sleep shorts that hang low on his hips and a white tank that clings to him so tightly I can see the curve of his spine through the worn fabric.

Even though he can't dance for shit, Romeo has a dancer's body. Lean, defined muscle in all the right places. Articulated joints that lend a gracefulness to his movements and scramble my thoughts.

He turns to face me and I watch wordlessly as nimble fingers unscrew a lid and set it on the counter. He lifts the milk carton to his mouth, resting it on his bottom lip before tilting his head back and exposing his throat. His Adam's apple hovers and then travels effortlessly up and down the column of his neck.

I keep moving. I must because I was at the door when I saw him, but I'm close to him now. So close I can see the hair on his forearms.

I know that hair. I know what it feels like to run my hand up his arm. I know the slight roughness, the soft caress of it on my palms.

I know other hair too. The hair on his head, though, admittedly, it was long and unruly when I knew it, a tangle I used to knot my fingers in as I moved inside him.

I know the hair on the small of his back too. I know it's blond. Fine. Barely there, but it glows when the sun hits it. I know it covers his entire body. Even the places now covered with clothes. Especially those places.

"Milk?" he offers.

I nod and reach out, not trusting my voice. There's something different about him right now. I'm not sure what it is, but maybe it's because Selby's fast asleep and we're completely alone. Maybe it's because it's dark. Romeo's always been one of those people who comes alive at night. Some people slow down and curl into themselves when the sun sets. Romeo gathers force.

He tilts the carton again and takes another sip, spilling a drop, a slow-moving rivulet that runs down the box when he rights it.

Sweat on skin.

Sweat on hot skin.

Ropes of semen running down a taut belly.

Deep, uneven breathing.

No! Stop that.

Don't think like that.

His lips quirk. His eyes find mine, reaching into my soul and gutting me as he slowly runs his tongue up the carton, licking the spill and swallowing it before handing the container to me.

I've always been mystified that time hasn't dulled how I feel about Romeo. I've always been convinced that the way I ached for him a month ago was as bad as it was a year ago, and that ache was as bad as the ache from two years ago, and so on and so forth.

I was wrong. I must have been. Because as bad as that pain was, it has nothing on the way I ache for him now.

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“O HAPPY DAGGER, THIS IS THY SHEATH”

THEN

WHEN ROMEO AND I were kids, we usually had joint birthday parties. It made sense, seeing how we were born just a little over three weeks apart, him at the end of May, me in mid-June. The year we turned eighteen was no different, though my mom suggested we wait until early July for the party. She said it was so summer could set in, so we could bank on good weather. Romeo and I didn't say anything, not even to each other, but we both knew it was because she wanted to let the anniversary of Sal's death come and go and for the dust it stirred up to settle, so there was a fighting chance Romeo would have a good time at the party.

It had been a long, terrible year with way more lows than highs. I'd come to understand that even though the wound caused by losing his mother had stopped bleeding, it was only because it had grown over. Time was a skin graft that covered a deep gash that hadn't been stitched up or treated. The wound underneath was still open and hadn't come close to healing. Even though there were hours and even days when he seemed almost like his old self, inside, Romeo was hurt in a way I'd started to think would be part of him forever.

On bad days, he came through my window at night, and I held him as sobs wracked him. On those nights, I bargained with every deity I could think of. I begged them to take his pain from him and give it to me instead. I raged against God and life and death. I felt Romeo's pain in my chest. It hurt worse than anything I'd ever felt of my own. The pain of it was so deep

and terrible I still felt the murmur of it in my joints when I let myself think about Romeo without bracing first.

On bad days, I'd wait until he'd cried himself out and his breathing started to lengthen and even out, and then I'd hold him tighter and whisper furiously into his ear. "I won't ever let anything bad happen to you again, Romeo. I won't. As long as I live, *nothing* bad will *ever* happen to you again. Do you hear me? I swear I won't let it."

I'd say it over and over.

I wouldn't stop until he chuckled and said, "Fine, I believe you."

Sometimes, he came to my room on good days too. He came the night after our eighteenth birthday party. We held the party in our garden and my dad hung strings of those multicolored bistro lights on the patio. It was nice. There weren't too many people, and there weren't too few. The food was great, and the vibe was chill. There were no speeches and the gifts were next level. All in all, it was a good day. It was as close to perfect a day as we'd had since Sally died.

My head had scarcely hit the pillow when I heard the soft clunk on the garage roof that had come to signal his arrival. That night, Romeo didn't cry. He lay on his back as I curled my body around him, mind racing as I tried to work out how much I could touch him without it being too much. He talked for hours. It was like the old days when dreams spilled out of him and leaked into me. I closed my eyes and let his imagination take me where he wanted. The story he told me was haunting and beautiful and so goddamn real that I was breathless, happy, angry, sad, and wired like someone who'd been on a psychedelic trip by the time it ended.

"You should write that one down, Romeo."

He laughed. "What for?"

"I don't know. Just so...I guess you should write it down so maybe someday other people can read it or something."

He rolled onto his side, facing away from me, waiting for me to move closer before speaking again. I tucked one hand under my head and wrapped the other around his waist, pulling him as close as I could without my boner digging into him.

"But, Tiger," he said dreamily, "you're the only one who matters."

"Write it down," I insisted until he dissolved into an uncharacteristic fit of giggles.

On nights like that, when he was more okay than he wasn't, he felt good in my arms. Good and right. I ached differently on those nights, the good nights. It was an ache so intense it left a sweet taste in my mouth. An ache that stretched and expanded until my skin felt too tight. An ache that sank so low and ran so deep that my balls felt bruised for the whole of the next day.

Looking back now, I can't quite remember how it came to be that Romeo and I went to different colleges. I mean, I do remember how it happened. I got a scholarship to study actuarial science at Ohio State and Romeo's dad wasn't doing very well without Sal. Romeo didn't want to leave him on his own, so he enrolled at our local college.

What I don't remember is how the hell anyone got me to agree to it. That's what I don't know. Seems very off-brand for me when I think of it now.

Maybe it was as simple as the fact that when I told Romeo I didn't want to leave him, he looked at me quizzically and said, "But, Jude, I'm going to be an English teacher, and New York is expensive. You're the one who's always saying it is. If one of us doesn't have a job that makes good money, how are we going to be able to live there?"

Could I really have been that dumb? Could I really have decided my entire future based on an off-hand comment made by a friend?

Ha!

What a question. Given that the friend in question was Romeo, I was exactly that dumb and then some.

We were at Romeo's house when he said it. On his front porch, waiting for my mom to pick us up and take us shopping for clothes. My mom had realized Romeo hadn't been shopping since Sal died, and she'd taken it upon herself to give his wardrobe "a spruce," as she called it.

It was hot and blustery that day, but Romeo looked cool. His hair was still ashy, and though his skin was turning golden, it hadn't quite taken on the full warmth of its summer glow.

There was no real weight or intention in his words. He didn't even look all that serious when he said it. Still, it felt as though someone had kicked my feet out from under me. It felt beyond belief. Unreal that a world existed where Romeo and I could live together, have our own place, do what we wanted, and I could be the one to take care of him. Not just with my words

or my body like I'd always done. Like, really take care of him, financially and shit.



As summer wore on, my anxiety about leaving Alabaster in general and Romeo in particular kept climbing. Romeo seemed mellow and resigned about it, which was unlike him, but it could have been because he'd come out of the worst of the fog of grief and his dick had started bothering him with a vengeance.

"Fuck. I'm horny," replaced "Holy shit, why are my feet so big?" as his main complaint in life. He'd started banging on about it the same way he had a few years earlier about not being kissed. "I'm eighteen, and I'm the only person who's ever touched my dick. How sad is that?"

"Thought you said Jodie touched it that time you took her to Mo's for a milkshake."

He sighed heavily. I tried not to laugh. I knew exactly what was coming next.

"Yeah, and I've told you I'm not even sure she meant to do it. She, like, kind of tapped it but pulled her hand away real fast. *Real* fast, Jude."

"Was it hard?"

"No, it was a soft tap. She just brushed her hand against it. Yeah, no, I'm pretty sure it was just an accident."

"I meant your dick, you tool." It was probably wrong of me, but talking to Romeo about his dick did things for me that were out of this world, and I wanted more of it, even if it was crossing a line.

"Have you met me?" His head twitched with incredulity, and fuck, he looked adorable. "Of course it was hard. Don't waste my time with ridiculous questions, Tiger. Was it hard? What the fuck? When isn't it hard? I'm staring down the barrel of being the biggest loser ever to enroll in college, and you're making jokes. Nice one, bud. Real nice."

"If you think you're the biggest loser ever to enroll in college, something tells me you'll be pleasantly surprised when you get there."

“I really don’t know why you’re not more worried about this. We’re *virgins*, Jude.” He said it like it was an infectious disease. “Virgins who have never even had their cocks touched. If you think that’s going to be a turn-on for some hot college girl, you’ve got it very wrong. Women have enough shit to deal with without having to tangle with guys who don’t know what to do with their own dicks.”

“I know what to do with my dick,” I teased.

He pressed his lips together and shook his head sympathetically. “No, you don’t. You think you do, but you really don’t. You’ll probably come the second someone who’s not you touches it.”

“Bet I won’t.”

The conversation was light. We were joking. Taking the piss. Having a laugh. But my words had grown barbs, and suddenly, I was two hundred feet in the air, walking a tightrope without anything close to the skill required to do so.

He cocked his head, and when he looked at me again, there was a glint in his eyes that was more sex than sweet. “Bet you will.”

My laugh was strange, a hollow, clanking sound that rattled around the basement, bouncing off walls before finding a quiet place to land. We were sitting on the sofa, and Romeo got up to turn the Xbox on. He opened *World War Z*, his favorite game at the time.

Truth be told, I was a little bored of killing zombies and a lot more interested in our previous topic.

“Remember that time we kissed?” I asked, taking care to keep my voice low and spread my words out evenly.

He stopped what he was doing, his jaw dropping and mouth breaking into a huge grin that wasn’t at all like him. “Yeah.”

It wasn’t that we never spoke about it. We mentioned it a couple of times after it happened to check on each other. It was just that it had been a really long time since either of us had brought it up.

After a little while, I managed, “That was dumb, huh?”

He handed me a controller and traced his thumb along the seam of his lips before sitting. The bench seat of the sofa tilted as he sank into it, and I found myself more than a little off-kilter. There was space between us, but not much. Half a foot, maybe. We weren’t touching, but we would have been if either of us moved. For me, that little bit of space was almost worse than no space.

“Not that dumb,” he said matter-of-factly as he scrolled through locations in the game. “I handled the shit out of myself when I kissed Riley because I knew what I was doing. You were there. You saw me.”

I hummed noncommittedly and started praying for a more sensible version of myself to take the reins. No one turned up. “We could jerk each other off. You know, just so we’d know what it’s like. So we don’t, like, embarrass ourselves in front of anyone else.”

The attempt to keep my voice even failed spectacularly.

I felt myself color and burn from the horror and shame of what I’d just said. I died several deaths as I waited for Romeo to respond. I was about to take my words back and focus my full attention on finding the highest structure in Alabaster and throwing myself off it when Romeo said, “And you won’t tell anyone?”

My head whipped to the side. His eyes were dusty blue. Wide open with nothing to hide. Pale, with no hint of storm clouds on the horizon.

There was no hesitation in them.

And there was no hesitation in my answer either. “Never.”

“Just this one time, right?”

“Oh yeah. Definitely. One time.”

My tongue had grown thick in my mouth and my heart was beating hard enough to crack bone. Romeo leaned back, lifting his T-shirt to expose a hint of his belly as he unbuckled his belt. His skin was paler there. Lighter than his face and arms. I watched, transfixed, as he did it.

There was no hint of a tremor in his hands.

Mine were shaking like dry autumn leaves in a strong breeze. I rubbed myself through my pants, a little ruse that impressed me at the time. I was rock solid simply from being close to Romeo, but I didn’t want him to know that—I remember coming back to that moment later and feeling stupidly proud of myself for thinking to do it.

I was wearing athletic shorts, so thankfully, I didn’t have to wrangle with anything as complex as buttons or zippers. When Romeo undid his fly, I shoved my shorts down and took my dick out.

His boxer briefs were salmon pink. A soft, faded color. I don’t know why that surprised me so much, but it did. At the time, I had at least an entire persona dedicated to thinking about things like what color Romeo’s underwear would be, and I’d always thought they’d be black or white. Maybe gray. Blue at a push.

But pink? *Oof*.

I loved that.

The air in the basement was heavy and hot. Stagnant. The faint generic rock of the World War Z theme played on repeat. Just the first part. Just the first few bars that play as you select your game.

I looked down and then up very fucking fast. Romeo had his dick in his hand. It was hard. Naked and swollen. The skin was smooth and darker on the head than on his shaft. It was perfect. The shock of seeing it in real life, not my hazy, lust-fueled dreams, knocked the stuffing out of me. I turned my gaze sharply to the TV and then to the ceiling, unsure where to look.

“Should we close our eyes?” suggested Romeo.

“Yeah,” I mumbled. “Sure.”

He reached down and circled my shaft and then let his eyelids slide shut. He was tentative at first, his touch too soft and then a little too hard, but his hand was hot. Hot and meaty and more intoxicating than anything I’d ever felt.

He shifted his hips, a subtle nudge to remind me what I was supposed to be doing. I acted immediately. I sprang into action without a second’s pause. I reached down and took his dick in my hand, curling my fingers around him right near the base. I touched it as if it were mine. As if I knew exactly what to do. How to touch him. How to make him feel good.

I did make him feel good. I must have because his eyelids fluttered as if he were dreaming and his head rolled back, nestling into the sofa. He kept his eyes closed. I barely blinked. I watched as my hand slid slowly up and down his erection. He was uncut and beautiful. Solid steel sheathed in velvet. Dusty-pink velvet that moved with my hand. Up, then down.

He started moving his hand too. He matched his movements with mine exactly. For once, it was hard to say who was leading and who was following.

Our hands kept moving. Slow. Steady. His grip was a little softer than how I touched myself and it drove me crazy. It felt so good I thought I’d lose my mind. Too little. Too much. Too good. Good, so good. Everything felt good. Everything. My body. My mind. All of it was perfect. Our hands kept moving in a slow, slick rhythm. Now and again, I rolled my thumb over the swell of his head and worked the bead of precum I found there into his skin. He did the same to me and nearly turned me inside out from the

effort. When it didn't provide quite enough lubrication, I brought my hand to my mouth and licked my palm.

When I touched him again, he moaned. It was a soft, helpless sound. The most beautiful sound I'd ever heard. A sound I caught and held to my chest. The most perfect, precious thing I'd ever owned.

Beside me, Romeo stiffened. Without looking, I could feel tension bleed into every part of his body. His abs clenched and he grabbed the sofa cushion with his free hand, fingernails digging into the soft fabric. His grip on my dick tightened, and I couldn't tell if he was pouring pleasure into me or dragging it out. The sofa rocked gently as his hips started to buck. The hand on my cock started moving faster. Mine moved faster too. Faster and faster until we lost our rhythm and our movements grew jerky as we both chased our pleasure.

Romeo's head tilted back. He clenched his teeth and bit his bottom lip hard, staining it red. "I'm gonna..."

That was all it took. Those words. That husky voice. Romeo's voice saying those words.

I exploded.

White-hot pleasure ripped through me. The room disappeared. The walls. The TV. Even the God-awful, half-manic sound of the World War Z theme fell silent. It all disappeared, and all that was left was Romeo and me. Our hands and our cocks. Our chests rising and falling. The twin strangled sounds of our orgasms.

"Holy shit," Romeo said after we'd shoved our dicks back into our pants and order had started returning to chaos. "If that's what a hand is like, imagine what a mouth feels like."

The night before I left for Ohio State, Romeo and I sixty-nined on that very same sofa in our basement. It was late and dark. The only light in the room came from the TV. It felt other. Like something that happened outside of me. Something bigger and better than anything that had happened to me in real life. It felt like a story Romeo had told me. One of those stories where his eyes would glaze over and go dreamy, and I'd feel like I'd been catapulted through the air and ravaged by the time it was over.

“A WINGED MESSENGER OF HEAVEN”

THEN

COLLEGE WAS DIFFERENT FROM what I had expected. I was different, and that surprised me. Without the weight of the expectations of people who'd known me all my life, I felt free, and I hadn't expected that. I hadn't even really realized I hadn't felt free in Alabaster.

I didn't go out nearly as much as I thought I would, and I enjoyed the actual course work a hell of a lot more than I had expected. There was a weird peace to having my mind properly challenged that I'd never experienced before. I never even knew it was missing. I loved the library. I loved being somewhere with an active queer community. Even though the closest I came to participating was lurking on the periphery, it felt good to know there were others like me out there.

Romeo and I messaged incessantly. Barely a thought crossed either of our minds without us making sure the other knew about it.

Jude. Urgent. Do you think I should have another doughnut?

No.

It has sprinkles.

Still no.

Why not???

You already had two.

That was like four hours ago.

It was today, and that's how you know you don't need another one.

Two doughnuts per day? That's it? Is that what you're trying to say?

You're a sadist, Tiger.

Never knew that about you.

There are lots of things you don't know about me.

Yeah, right. Name one.

Off the top of my head, I could think of two, and they were both big ones—I'm gay, and I'm in love with you.

I didn't tell him either of those things. I didn't even consider it. It's not that I thought he'd judge me for being gay. I knew he wouldn't. Sal and Mike raised him right, and I knew he wasn't homophobic.

In sophomore year, this asshole, Seth Bower, used the F-slur against Romeo while I was out of school at an orthodontist appointment. The second I heard about it, I had a short, loud word with Seth that ended with my fist in his face and left the whole school, all the teachers, and several parents in no doubt whatsoever what would happen if anyone tried that shit on Romeo again.

"Are you okay?" I'd asked him as we walked home from school.

"Yeah, I am. You didn't need to do that, you know. I can take care of myself."

"I know that."

"And I don't think being gay is a bad thing. I'm upset that *he* thinks it's an insult. It's fucked up and pathetic. I don't appreciate him using that word.

And, and, I guess I'm a little upset because it didn't feel good to be told I'm something I'm not, and now I'm conflicted about it because I don't think it's a bad thing in the first place."

"I get it, Romeo. It's not about whether it's a good thing or a bad thing. It's about wanting to be seen for who you are."

I did get it. I got it in a very big way. I lived with the strangeness of people assuming I was straight almost daily. I won't lie and say I didn't like the cover of it, the safety it offered, but I hated that I wasn't being true to myself. I told myself I wasn't ready to come out all through high school, and by the time I got to college, I still almost completely believed that.

The truth was a little murkier.

Looking back now, I can see I was ready, but I was afraid that if I told Romeo, he'd know. He'd know that practicing kissing and hand jobs with him wasn't just practicing kissing and hand jobs to me. He'd know that letting me suck his dick lit up parts of my soul I had no idea even existed. Basically, I knew that if I told him I was gay, it wouldn't take him long to work out the other big secret I was keeping from him.

I knew Romeo loved me. It's not that I didn't. I never had any doubt about that. He told me often. He ended long phone calls with a casual, "Love you, Tiger," and he told me I was the best person he knew almost every time he had an altercation or awkward encounter with anyone else—which happened pretty damn often in Romeo's world. I knew I was important to him and that he needed me. Looking back now, I can see how much I bought into being needed by Romeo. A huge amount of my self-worth was tied to it.

He called me most nights during the first year. Sometimes, the calls were short, and I knew he was just checking in. Checking a box we both needed ticked to get a good night's sleep. Sometimes, I'd answer and be greeted by nothing but a soft sigh. On those nights, I'd turn off my light and switch to video, propping my phone on my pillow, and he'd do the same. I'd see the dim outline of him, curled on his side, face a little too close to the screen.

Sometimes, he'd whisper, "It's heavy," and even though I was hundreds of miles away, I'd feel my ribs cracking under the endless expanse of his grief. Scar tissue that spelled the words *Romeo, Romeo, Romeo* would sting as if the wound was brand new and had been freshly carved into my flesh.

On those nights, I affirmed every oath I'd ever made to him, and for good measure, I'd make them all over again. "I won't let anything bad happen to you, Romeo. Not again. Not ever."

We'd both fall asleep without hanging up.

On other nights, when life was lighter, the calls would be short or ridiculous.

“Imagine if your parents had named you Mashed Potato, Jude.”

“Why the fuck would they do that?”

“That’s not the point. The point is, imagine the impact it would have had on your life. Imagine how it would’ve changed who you are as a person.”

“Why would they name me Mashed Potato?” I wailed. “It’s not even a great type of potato.”

“I’m making a point here, Jude, but *fine*, what kind of potato do you want to be?”

“I mean, Roast Potato has a better ring to it. Even Baked Potato would be better, I think.”

“Nah, there’s no way you’re Roast or Baked. No way at all. You’re Mashed Potato. Or *maybe* Sweet Potato, and that’s my final offer.”

It was fucking silly, but it made me laugh my ass off. “But I’m not orange, Romeo, and you know damn well I’m not all that sweet.”

“Well, you’re not crispy either, and do you think I’d forget about the time you got into Lexi’s self-tan? Because I assure you, my friend, I haven’t, and I won’t for as long as I live.”

The self-tan thing was a bad decision, I admit it. A very, very bad decision. After the initial attempt turned out streaky, I added more product to even things out. I ended up so orange that my teeth looked fluorescent.

“Okay,” I said when my eyes stopped watering, “Sweet Potato it is. What’s your potato name?”

His mouth twisted with indignation. “Who says I’m a potato?”

“If I’m a potato, you’re a potato.” I had him there. Even he couldn’t argue with that logic.

“I guess I’d be French Fry,” he said after giving the matter serious thought.

“Absolutely not.”

“Of course I’m French Fry! I’m long and skinny. What else would I be?”

“Baby Potato.”

“Don’t you fucking dare, Tiger. I’m serious. Don’t you start. I know what you’re like. You give someone a random nickname and stick with it forever.”

“Um, excuse me? You’re literally the one who’s called me Tiger since the day you met me. That’s *eleven* years, Baby Potato.”

A soft rumble of laughter peeled out of him and the outline of him on the screen was so beautiful and so sexy that I checked to make sure only my face

was on screen and then let my hand wander down my belly and under the waistband of my pajamas.

I didn't stroke exactly. Not completely. I just held my dick in my hand and squeezed it every time he spoke. We talked more about potatoes. Romeo made another argument for French Fry, and after I shut that shit down for good, he said, "Okay, okay, I'm going. Night, Jude. Love you."

I was about to hang up when he popped back into view. He had the same sweet, almost-innocent-but-not-quite look on his face that he always had when he said it.

"Show me?"

I quickly dragged my hand out of my pants and flipped the screen, aiming my camera at the window. It was opened a crack, like always.

It was getting late. Romeo was tired. His voice was smoother and even quieter than usual. "Aren't the mosquitoes eating you alive?"

"Yeah, they fucking are." I laughed.

"It's 'cause you have sweet blood, Sweet Potato," he said before hanging up.

My hand found its way back into my pants and my mind flicked through reams of memories of Romeo, and I plucked out one of my favorites.

It happened a couple of months before when I was home for Spring Break. Vacations in Alabaster had been different since we started college. Romeo had made new friends, and they were around a lot. The dynamic was different from what it had been like when we were in school. These were friends he'd chosen on his own, not friends he'd inherited from me.

I didn't mind it. I didn't. I wanted him to have friends. I just noticed, that's all. And it was just that with his new friends around so much, the two of us hadn't been alone for a while and nothing had happened in the basement for a really long time. A *really* long time. Such a long time that I'd started to think it might never happen again.

The night in question was a Saturday. We'd been out, hanging out at the lookout on the outskirts of town with Romeo's new friends. I'd been attacked by mosquitoes, and by the time we got to my place, I was scratching like a man possessed.

"Stop scratching," said Romeo.

"I can't! I've been violently assaulted by blood-sucking parasites." I was wearing jeans and a tank, so most of the bites were on my arms. My wrists, in particular, had been mauled. The itch was unreal.

"*Stop*," said Romeo again.

“Can’t!”

I started up again, frenzied, and Romeo stepped toward me with purpose. He grabbed my wrist from me and held it firmly in his hand. Various signals rushed from my brain to my dick. Several of them got scrambled so badly that my legs went lame.

Romeo moved closer. Somehow, I ended up backed against the hallway wall, though I didn’t think I was there when the interaction began. The plaster was smooth and cool behind me. An inferno raged in front of me.

Romeo looked down at my wrist, turning it this way and that as he inspected the damage. “You’ll break the skin,” he said softly.

My palm was open, fingers relaxed and splayed out. He stood close to me. So goddamn close. It was just the two of us, and for me, at least, electricity filled the space between us. He was looking down, long lashes spilling shadows onto his cheeks, making him look angelic. Almost, not quite. He looked like a seraph made for seduction. An angel created for the sole purpose of making me fall.

He was still looking at my wrist and wasn’t happy with what he saw. I could tell because he hummed softly and tutted unhappily. He started running one of his fingers over the bites. His touch was firm but gentle. He didn’t use his nail. Just his fingertip. He worked his way up my forearm to my elbow and then back down again. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end. When he was done, I was swaying, soothed and burning in a totally different way.

His fingers were still curled around my wrist, not quite tightly enough to pinch, but close. He let my arm drop down to my side, but he didn’t let go. When I tried to move, his face changed. His eyes sparked and he gritted his teeth as a smile I hadn’t seen before spread across his face. It started at the corners of his mouth, curling his lips and gradually working its way up to his eyes. It was an unexpected, hard smile. There was something unusual about it. It was stronger than normal. Possessive, maybe? Maybe even a little domineering. He tightened his grip on my wrist and his lips began moving lazily around his new smile as he spoke.

“Don’t hurt yourself,” he said. In my love- and lust-addled recollection of the event, his eyes added a steely “*’cause you’re mine*” to the end of the sentence.

“FIRE AND POWDER”

Now

I FEEL WORSE THAN hell. I look it too. My reflection in the mirror assures me of that. My eyes are bloodshot. Dark-brown orbs with squiggly red blood vessels swimming around them and puffy bags underneath. My skin looks sallow rather than olive and my hair is all over the place, thick dark swoops that fall into my face. I hardly got any sleep last night. I tossed and turned and jerked off so much after the whole midnight milk thing that my dick feels vaguely assaulted this morning.

Selby has left for work by the time I venture out of my room. I peek my head out to make sure the coast is clear and scurry to the guest bathroom. The guest bathroom is the only room in the house that hasn't been done yet. Selby apologized to me at length when she showed me to my room last night. The fittings are dated and the walls are painted olive green. A primitive painting of a sacred heart hangs above the toilet. It's in a large, ornate frame that dwarfs the painting. I remember Romeo calling it his masterpiece as he carried it home after art one day. We must have been in the third or fourth grade at the time.

Sally was over the moon when he gave it to her. She didn't exclaim or give Romeo grand, over-the-top compliments like most parents did, but I could tell she loved it because she undid the necklace around her neck and held her palm out to Romeo. The gold chain pooled in her hand and the spinel in her pendant caught the light and reflected like stained glass in an old church. It was her most prized possession. A sacred heart.

“Have I ever told you the story of how you got your name, Romeo?”

Romeo's head tilted, and he flicked his eyes at the ceiling. It was clear he'd heard the story more than once, but I never had, so I moved closer. The pendant in Sally's hand was beautiful. The stone was rich and dark. Blood red and well cut. The flame, lance, and thorns were high-karat gold and had been intricately engraved.

"Daddy and I were in Verona in Italy. We'd been traveling together for weeks and had been friends for a very long time." As she spoke, images flitted around the kitchen. Cobbled streets, arched doorways. Stone buildings with a long, languid river meandering through them. Sandstone and ochre. Bottle-green windows with shutters that worked. A soft glow that radiated off the buildings. The world Sally wove wasn't as clear to me as the ones Romeo did, but I was still enchanted. "We'd already visited Rome and Venice, and even though I loved them, to me, Verona was magical. Daddy and I recited lines from *Romeo and Juliet* to each other the whole time, and somewhere between the Arena de Verona and the Piazza delle Erbe, something between Daddy and me changed."

"Oh, please don't make this a gross story," Romeo whispered under his breath.

Sal smiled. "I saw this necklace in an antique shop at the end of a quiet, narrow street. I loved it so much I asked to try it on even though I knew I couldn't afford it." She smiled again, and this time, she looked up at Mike, who was lying on the sofa in the living room with his feet up. "Five months later, Daddy gave me this necklace for my birthday. He'd bought it that day in Verona and carried it in his pocket every day since." Mike had turned down the TV and pushed himself up on one elbow. He was watching Sal with a lax, love-struck expression.

"The second I saw it, my heart almost stopped." Sal was looking back at Mike with exactly the same expression. "That was the moment I knew Daddy and I weren't just friends anymore."

"I loved you from the second I saw you," said Mike.

"You did not."

"I did too. I was helpless from the first day, Sal. Helpless."

Sally giggled and continued, "Daddy put the necklace on for me. I held my hair up like this"—she gathered as much as she could of her hair in both hands to show us—"and he struggled with the clasp. It took him ages. I thought I would have to call a friend to help him. I don't think he'd had a lot to do with jewelry until then."

“It wasn’t that. I knew how to fix a clasp, Sal. I felt like I was going to faint from being close to you. That was my problem,” said Mike, strolling over to where we were.

Sally rolled her eyes, but they were as soft as I’d ever seen them.

“Later that night, I was in my bathroom,” she continued, “and I was admiring the way the pendant looked around my neck in the mirror, and for a second, I felt like I was back in Verona. Back on the cobbled streets, in the little antique shop surrounded by dust and treasures, with a young man in the back engraving rings and trophies. It was like I’d entered a portal.” Romeo’s eyes were wide and slightly glazed over. I realized Sal’s stories had the same effect on him as his on me. “One second, I was in Verona, and the next, I was back in front of the mirror, staring straight at my future.” Mike was standing behind her and had curled an arm around her waist. “I remember thinking to myself, if Mike and I have a son, I’ll name him Romeo. Of course”—Sal turned around in Mike’s arms and fixed him with a pretend annoyed look—“you *still* took almost three months to ask me out.”

Mike laughed and kissed her lightly. “What can I tell you. I loved you so much I’d have been happy to be just friends for the rest of my life, as long as it meant I’d get to spend time with you.”

“Come on, Jude,” said Romeo, guiding me upstairs to his room. “We better go. You don’t want to see this.”

By the time I’m out of the shower and dressed, the smell of coffee wafts down the hall to greet me. The kitchen is deserted, but there’s coffee in the pot and a box of cereal has been left out. Lucky Charms. I haven’t eaten them in almost a decade, but they used to be my favorite before I started caring about things like sugar content and carbs. I feel a familiar tug of hope, that old *maybe Romeo loves me back*.

It’s bullshit, obviously. And maybe a bit of limerence?

I like the word but can’t remember exactly what it means, so I look it up on my phone. It’s a state of acute intensity. An obsessive infatuation with another, often littered with enough intrusive thoughts to make it impossible to think about anything other than one’s love interest. *Hmm. That does sound like me*. Ecstasy when feelings are returned—*wouldn’t know much about that*—and a state of agony when they aren’t. *Yeah, I’m all over that bad boy*.

I read a little more, and Jesus, I have this limerence thing down pat. Might have to give Moira a call later and find out if it's treatable.

God, imagine if it is.

Imagine if I could stop this.

Imagine if I could get over him.

I take my coffee and cereal out to the back porch with me. The swing creaks when I sit and sways gently under my weight. I shovel the congealed mush in my bowl into my mouth and masticate thoughtfully as I watch Romeo. He's wearing an old pair of shorts and work boots with loose laces. He's shirtless and his hair hasn't been brushed. His back is tanned, but a sliver of skin above his waistband is paler. A thin band that's only exposed because he's reaching up to prune the climbing rosebush that grows along the back fence. It's a sliver of skin I want to touch. Skin I want to kiss. Skin I want to lick. And bite.

He gardens for ages. Snipping this and snipping that. Tossing the dead wood onto the ground in a pile to his right and acting like he knows what he's doing. He moves around the garden as if unaware I'm watching him. Maybe he is. It's a good-sized garden, and I didn't call out when I got here.

The scent of a lilac bush mingles with the sickly-sweet taste of the Lucky Charms. It's almost too much. I should hate it, but it falls just short. Instead of hating it, I find myself feeling worryingly giddy. The smells, the sugar, the sight of Romeo and all his fucking golden skin are making me feel unhinged.

Romeo drops his secateurs onto the grass and saunters back to the house. The gold chain around his neck glints in the sun, and the pendant he's worn since the day after Sal's funeral sways slowly from side to side on his chest. I'm acutely aware that I need to stop looking at him. It's inappropriate and deeply embarrassing to be such a simp. It's pathetic. I know that.

I don't stop looking though. I can't. Instead, I roll my gaze over every inch of his exposed skin, and I don't stop until he's standing in front of me, a few feet away, leaning against the porch railing.

Our eyes meet, and it's fire and ice. Fuel and a flame.

"Jude." He says it as if it's a whole sentence. As if it's the start and the end. As if it's something that means something to him. His eyes are so sad when he says it that I find it hard to maintain eye contact. The sight of Romeo hurt or in pain has always been my kryptonite. My greatest weakness. My total downfall. "You really came back, huh?"

“Yeah, I, er, it was a mistake. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t ha—”

A visor slams down. The soft, glimmering warmth turns icy. His jaw clenches. “You still think *that* was your mistake?”

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“THE DAY IS HOT”

THEN

THE SUMMER AFTER THE first year of college was long and sultry. Charged in a way that was beyond anything I’d ever felt. Everything was intense. Every interaction between Romeo and me was exaggerated and seemed in crystal clear focus. Everything that wasn’t him was pale and lackluster.

His new college friends were around a lot. Kellie loved reading and seemed blissfully unaware that people don’t usually read during conversations with others. She hung out with Romeo a lot but didn’t participate in many discussions other than to look up and say, “What the fuck?” now and again. Sean was studying art history and English literature. He had a lot to say about almost everything. Some of it was actually pretty funny. Just not as funny as Romeo thought it was.

When I met them, Kellie dropped her book a fraction and peeked over it, nodding and giving me a little smile.

“Well, well, well,” said Sean, “check it out, Kel. If Romeo’s to be believed, we’ve just met the best human being in existence.”

Romeo slung his arm loosely around my shoulder and pulled me so close his hair brushed against my cheek. His laughter was soft, but that close, I could feel the sound reverberating in his chest.

If I’d been shot at close range right then, I’d have been unharmed. Completely unscathed. Not a scratch on me.

That was the power Romeo had over me.

Summer crawled by in a way that left me in no doubt whatsoever that there really was a tear in time. Days were long and weeks were short. It was boring and lovely and carefree, and I was so desperately in love with Romeo I could hardly think straight.

At the end of July, my parents rented a camper van and took a road trip to Isle Royale National Park. Lexi had finished college by then and was working in Detroit, and I'd already spent a full year at college. Still, it was the first time my parents felt comfortable leaving me home alone for more than a night or two.

I loved it. I used all the money they left me and ate nothing but pizza for the first three days. I hung out at Romeo's pool during the day, and at night, he came over and chilled at my place. The pace of life in Alabaster must have been getting to Kellie and Sean because, for the first time that summer, they found things to do that took them out of town.

I had Romeo all to myself, and let me tell you, I lapped that shit up. I gorged myself on his attention. I saw him morning, noon, and night and still wanted more. The day in question was a Thursday. It was mid-afternoon, and we'd eaten all the good snacks at Romeo's house and were at my place looking for something better.

"I could make nachos," I said after staring into the pantry cupboard for long enough to feel sure its contents weren't magically going to morph into something that didn't need cooking or effort.

"Hmm," said Romeo in that wistful way that let me know his attention was drifting. "Maybe later." His eyes didn't drift as much as I had expected. They started to wander and then stopped and livened instead. He tilted his head toward my dad's booze cabinet. "How 'bout something stronger?"

Now, Romeo and I had raided my dad's booze cabinet before. We'd taken our first drink together while sitting on Inferno a few years back after sneaking out one night. Both of us laughed our asses off at the faces we made as the liquor went down. We'd each gone to college with fake IDs in our wallets, but neither of us was a party animal. We had the odd drink now and again, but we didn't get shitfaced, let's put it like that.

Romeo suggesting a drink wasn't unheard of. It was something that had happened a bunch of times before, so I didn't think anything of it. I poured the bourbon—neat—into two of my dad's cut crystal tumblers and handed one to Romeo. Normally, when we drank, we took rushed swigs straight out of the bottle or decanted it into a mug or something like that for plausible

deniability. The crystal made us feel so fancy we took turns saying, “Cheers” in terrible British accents and clanking our glasses together.

There was a heady freedom to knowing my parents were well and truly miles away. Maybe we still felt a little illegal about what we were doing, though, because we took the bottle and our tumblers upstairs to my room instead of drinking downstairs. Romeo sat on my bed, long legs crossed in front of him, back squished into the corner between the headboard and the wall. I had a big exercise ball in my room, and I sat unsteadily on that. Half-bouncing, half-rocking.

The bourbon went to my head. I could literally feel the first sip burn its way down my esophagus and then shoot up my chest and throat and sizzle my brain. My face felt warm. Too warm.

Romeo had grown pensive. When that happened, he either dipped into his own world by himself or pulled me in with him. That time, he did neither. He popped back up and gave me a mischievous quirk of his lips.

“So, like, you still a virgin, or what?” he asked. There was a steely seriousness to him that didn’t match his words or his smirk.

I considered a lot of what had happened between Romeo and me before I left for college to be sex, but I knew what he meant, so I said, “Yeah. I am.” It was the early rumbling of a conversation, just the bare bones of a dialogue between friends, but there were warnings going off in my spine that made me feel like it might be the exact exchange I’d dreamed of for years. “You?”

He smiled because we both knew the chance of something major happening to him and Romeo not calling to tell me immediately was slim to none. “Yep. Still got it. My cherry’s intact. My V-card is unpunched.” He took a small, careful sip of bourbon. “I’m pure as the driven snow.” I snorted at that. I couldn’t help it. “You surprise me though, Tiger. No girls for you?”

“No,” I said quickly.

“No guys?” There was a lightness to the way he said it. An openness. An olive branch drenched in total acceptance.

Even though what Romeo did later was worse—way worse—that was my opening. That was my best friend saying *It’s okay if you’re gay and I’ll still love you* and *Let’s be honest with each other*, and I didn’t take it. I lied. The lie wasn’t that I’d been with other guys because I hadn’t. I hadn’t so much as kissed another man. No one but Romeo existed for me. Still, it was a lie.

A big, serious lie that was woven into our friendship and would come back to haunt us. I've often asked myself why I lied, and the truth is uncomfortable in its simplicity: I lied because I'd played out the conversation we were having a million times in my mind. A million or more. And I didn't want my coming out to derail it.

"No," I said even quicker, "no guys." For good measure, I said it with a little indignance.

"Hmph." He stared into the bottom of his glass, turning it slowly in one hand as if looking into a Magic 8 Ball. "Lots of girls like you."

"Probably 'cause I'm so handsome," I teased.

"You are handsome." He said it as if it were a fact, and that tilted my entire world on its axis. "I've always wondered why you don't have sex with them."

"Dunno. Maybe I'm shy."

"You're not shy, Tiger."

He wasn't wrong. "Nah, I guess not."

"I had the chance, you know, to have sex."

"You did?" That was news to me. I was interested. Not jealous exactly, just heightened in the same way I always was when Romeo spoke about things that pertained to his dick.

"Yeah, I did. It was this girl, Laine. She's a good friend of Kellie's, and Kellie unequivocally confirmed that she wanted to have sex with me. She wanted it for sure. It definitely wasn't my imagination."

I stifled a laugh. "So why didn't you do it?"

"I don't know." His voice had gone huskier than usual. "Maybe 'cause I really am shy." He looked vulnerable when he said it. Defenseless and unguarded. And, I swear, Romeo's vulnerability was like crack to me. "I kind of panicked, I think. I was going to do it, and then, I-I just felt like I couldn't because"—he raised his glass slightly so his mouth was covered, distorted by crystal—"because I hadn't done it with you first."

He said it so quietly I thought I'd imagined it. So quietly that it took me a while to piece it together.

If multiverses existed, if there are parallel realities out there, there is a Romeo somewhere that's locked in that moment. A Romeo that says *because I hadn't done it with you first* over and over, and a me that sits on the big exercise ball at my desk in my childhood bedroom, totally

dumbstruck. Unable to move or speak. Unable to do anything but look into the pale, ocean eyes of the man I love.

That was it.

That was my moment.

The moment I'd spent so many hours thinking about that, sometimes, I think I somehow invoked everything that happened next.

"I could...we could...we could, like, take turns to...do it," I spluttered at last.

"Yeah?" He set the glass on my side table and sat up a little straighter.

I was talking fast and thinking slowly. "Yeah. I mean, it doesn't have to be a big deal or anything. We can just see what it feels like, and then we'll know, and—"

A kaleidoscope turned. Shyness and uncertainty dispersed and evaporated. Cool, calm, and assured replaced them. "So, who's going first?"

There was a pencil on my desk. One of those cheap yellow ones schools buy in bulk. I picked it up and snapped it between my fingers. "Long straw fucks, short straw has to take it?"

I couldn't feel my face when he nodded. I could barely make my hands work. I turned my back and shuffled the two halves of the pencil, lining the splintered ends up evenly and holding them out to Romeo. He was on his feet when I turned around, standing less than a foot away from me.

He chose the one on the right.

It was the long one.

He balled both fists, punched the air, and cried, "Yesss!"

It felt like my entire life had built to that moment. Like that very second was the reason I was made. The reason I existed. Everything between Romeo and me converged. Every smile, every laugh, every shared glance and inside joke. They all rushed toward me and met on the edge of something major. Something amazing.

I yanked my T-shirt off so hard and fast I heard a seam ripping. I dropped it on the floor, a little shocked and embarrassed by how fast I'd moved. I was about to start questioning whether it was too much or whether I should have acted a little cooler when Romeo reached out and dragged his fingers lightly through the trail of hair that ran from my navel and disappeared underneath the waistband of my shorts. A wave of arousal surged through me, so strong my vision rippled.

I started tugging at my button and stepping out of my shoes at the same time. I was moving at lightning speed. Romeo was in slow motion. His hands curled around the hem of his T-shirt, and he lifted it unhurriedly. More and more skin was gradually exposed. The same thing happened with his shorts. He undid them, eased them over his hips, and let them fall to the floor in a puddle around his bare feet.

It was the first time I'd ever seen him completely naked, and it was a sight so beautiful it was permanently branded onto my brain. His chest was smooth, nipples a soft dusky pink. Sal's pendant rested on his sternum. I'd seen it on him for years but had never touched it. I'd wanted to many times, but I hadn't. I did then. I touched it as if it were sacred. I touched him the same way. I ran a flat palm over the slight swell of his pec and down his left side. My hand inched down his belly, pausing and losing direction at the indented V that led to his cock. He was hard. His dick jutted out from his body at a slightly aggressive angle. Pink at the tip. Swollen and thick all the way to the base.

In all my dreams of that moment, I'd always imagined I'd be the one doing the fucking. I don't know why. It's just the way it was. Seeing Romeo hard and ready and knowing what he was going to do to me was an unfamiliar, vicious turn-on.

He was a little smaller than I was, which was something I loved thinking about, but still, I'd never put anything close to his size anywhere near my ass. The most I'd done was stick my middle finger up there when I jerked off. I'd done it a few times. It's not that I didn't like it. It felt kind of good. It just didn't rock my world the way guys on the internet said it would.

I was starting to have a little crisis of confidence, and at the same time, the urge to grab Romeo's dick and shove it in my mouth was becoming overwhelming.

I broke away from him before I did anything stupid and rummaged in my top drawer, whipping out the lube I kept there and tossing it to Romeo. My face colored from the mild shame of owning it at all, and for some stupid reason, I thought briefly about telling him I only used it on my dick.

If he felt any surprise that I had lube at the ready, he didn't show it. He flicked the cap and squirted a healthy amount into his hand. The reality of the situation I'd found myself in hit me in earnest the second he started coating his dick.

Fucking fuck.

He meant it.

It was happening. Not happening maybe at some distant point in the future. It was happening right then.

I took the two wooden steps required to get me to my bed and crawled onto it. I didn't look back, but I knew Romeo was smiling. Not smirking. Not quirking his mouth to the side. It was a soft, gentle smile that ran down my back and warmed me from head to toe. It took some of the awkwardness I was feeling and lit it on fire.

I knelt on all fours and spread my legs. When that made me feel too exposed, I grabbed a pillow and smooshed my face into it. Being face down, ass up didn't help at all with the feeling too exposed part, but it did give me something to bite down on when Romeo ran his hand up my inner thigh.

"I think I have to, like, open you or something," he murmured behind me.

I nodded into the pillow and didn't move a muscle. His touch was firm and sure. There was no hesitation. No warning. He sent a finger up my chute all the way to the knuckle.

"Fuck," he said softly.

"*Fuuuuck*," I said loudly.

I groaned in shock as he started to move his finger in and out of me. A confusion of sensations assaulted me. A fullness. A sting. A burn that changed my groan into a grunt.

It was all so new. It felt nothing like when I'd done it to myself. I'd felt my own efforts on my finger and I felt this in my core. The burn turned to a simmering heat and the fullness quickly turned decadent. Everything doubled when he inserted another finger. He moved slowly, taking his time as my body and mind began rushing.

"D'you think that's enough, or should I—"

There was an urgency in me I hadn't felt before. A necessity. A need. It raged through me, leaving my thoughts blurry and my speech garbled. "Yeah, it's enough. Just do it," I slurred.

"Are you sure?" he checked.

"Are you definitely going to let me fuck you?"

"Yeah. I will." There was that smile again. Deeper and darker that time.

"Swear?"

"I swear."

"Then I'm sure."

I spread my legs wider and pushed my ass back. Behind me, I heard a barely audible gasp.

Fuck me, I loved it. That little gasp. I loved it more than I could remember loving anything. It injected warm honey into my veins and made my heart race.

Romeo dabbed a little more lube on my opening and lined himself up. The slick, blunt head of his cock hit a little too high and then a little too low before settling right where it was meant to be. He notched it into me and thrust gently. At first, that's all it was, a firm, constant pressure that gradually got harder. I shifted my hips and tried to keep my breathing even. The pressure on my hole intensified. I felt myself stretch, a deep, slow burn that made my face feel hot. My ass spasmed and tried to clench shut. Romeo's hands on my hips held me in place as he kept pushing in. A sudden bright burst of pain ripped through me as my muscle gave way. I buried my face in the pillow and cried into it, terrified he'd hear me and stop.

It hurt, but it hurt in a way that made me want more. It hurt in a way that spoke to something inside me. Something that knew it was about to get good.

And it did. Romeo worked me over slowly and thoroughly. Dipping his dick into me more and more with each thrust. Sawing in and out of me, soothing the burn and rubbing pure pleasure into me. It flowed through me. Up me and down me. Hitting me in the chest and making me throw my head back and roar. As I did it, Romeo caught me. He wrapped a hand around my chest and pulled me toward him, reaching around and taking my dick in his hand.

At first, he just held it in that too-soft, too-hard way that drove me insane. My hips started bucking to get more sensation on my cock. I got more dick in my ass for my efforts as well.

"Feels good, Tiger," whispered Romeo. His voice was hoarse and broken. "Feels so good."

I bucked harder, and Romeo's cock slid deeper inside me. So deep it took my breath away and began a slow dance between pleasure and pain. I didn't stop or slow down because I could tell Romeo liked it. He'd started to moan in time with my movements, and that drugged me with pleasure. It wasn't just the physical sensation I was into. It was mental too.

I loved being in his arms.

In his hand.

I loved taking him into my body.

Accommodating him. Housing him. Making him feel good.

“It’s warm inside you.” His hand had moved from my dick to my throat, and when he spoke, I felt his lips move against the nape of my neck. “So hot and so good.”

My hand clamped onto my cock and started to jerk as if my life depended on it. Romeo’s thrusts had grown spasmodic and hard. Frantic. Feral. He wasn’t just moaning anymore. He was shouting his orgasm through tightly clenched teeth. A hot jet of semen erupted inside me, coating my insides, amplifying the slick sounds of his body crashing into mine.

My ass started to clamp down on him almost immediately, white-hot pleasure swelling inside me until survival seemed unlikely. It was unbearable. Intolerable. I couldn’t contain it. I couldn’t keep it inside.

So I didn’t.

I let go.

I was powder. He was fire. He lit a match and razed me to the ground.

I let him.

When it was done, I fell forward onto my belly. He set me down gently and pulled out of me. The emptiness was a shock. I hated it. I whined from the shock before I had time to stop myself.

Romeo soothed me with soft sounds and hot hands on my back. He held himself up over me on his hands and knees, crooning into my ear, waiting until I calmed.

As he got off the bed, he leaned down and dropped a kiss right between my shoulder blades and another on the small of my back. Off-center. To the right of my spine.

Both kisses were soft. Feathery and light. So light I may have thought I’d imagined them if his lips hadn’t punched open a portal straight to my soul.

“MAD BLOOD STIRRING”

Now

“SO, HOW ARE THINGS in good ole Alabaster?” I’m in the guest room at Romeo’s with the door closed, and I have Lexi on the phone.

“Not too bad. You know how it goes, some things change, some things don’t.”

“I get it,” Lexi says quietly. She really does. Other than therapists and the odd, heavily tattooed, sympathetic-looking bartender, my sister is the only person who knows what happened between Romeo and me. “Heard there’s a new coffee shop though, so some things change.”

“Yeah, I ordered a triple shot of shaken espresso with oat milk and a pump of salted caramel syrup yesterday, *and I got it*. Couldn’t believe it. Didn’t even have to repeat my order.”

“Unbelievable. Never thought I’d see the day. People must have been up in arms about Mo’s closing.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard it wasn’t pretty.”

“Have you seen any of the usual crowd yet?” By usual crowd, she means Romeo.

I side-step the question. “Nah, Dan’s been away and Ollie’s on a deadline this week. He’s having a barbeque at his place on Saturday. He’s invited everyone who still lives here, so it should be a good night.”

“That’ll be nice. It’ll be good for you to have a chance to catch up with the old crowd.” I nod wordlessly. I’m very much on the fence about whether I think anything about my being in Alabaster is a good thing or not. A big part of me thinks the best thing that could happen would be to go

back in time and refuse to come back here at all. I should have flown to Florida and insisted I be the one to take care of my gran. It's not like I'm really doing much at the house anyway. All I've done so far is get in the way and sneeze my ass off. "Where did you end up staying? Mom said there was no way you could stay in the house with the mess and all that."

I breathe out carefully, psyching myself up the way I always have to when I say his name. "I'm at Romeo's."

Lexi lets out a long, low whistle. She left her job and moved to New York to take care of me after Romeo married Selby. She's the only person who saw what it did to me. The only one who knows what happened and knows and loves Romeo too. The only one who understands who and what he is to me. She picked up the pieces after he broke me, and ever since then, she's done everything in her power to keep me together.

"Jesus, Jude. How's that going?"

"Oh, you know. Paddling down an alligator-infested river would be more fun. Being trapped in a pit filled with vipers and black widow spiders would be a hell of a lot nicer. Being buried alive with 'Baby Shark' playing on repeat would be a comparative luxury weekend retreat."

"That bad, huh?" She chuckles.

"No, you're not paying attention, Lex. It's worse. Way worse."

"So nothing's changed then?" Scant hope fades and is replaced with concern.

"Well, every surface in the house has been painted white, Mike's in Fairview with Mary, and Romeo is a stranger to me." That's factually true. Except for the times his eyes have blazed and he's looked through me, and I haven't been able to tell if I'm here now or then, but I don't think Lexi will sleep well if she knows all that. "And Selby is always around."

"Oof. How's she?"

"Not too bad, I guess." I mean, not too bad if you take away the fact I hate her more than I've ever hated anyone or anything.

"Huh." There's a pause, a little lull that suggests Lexi is thinking about whether or not to say more.

I know her too well to let her get away with that. "What?"

There's a silent hesitation, then, "Mom doesn't like her."

Now that's news to me. My mom has always been the type to like everyone. Giving them the benefit of the doubt, she calls it.

“No? Why not?” I’m not sure why, but something flighty, something fickle, something that feels an awful lot like wildly misplaced hope trots and turns into a canter in my chest.

“Ugh, I shouldn’t have said anything. Sorry. I’ve been trying not to. I know how hard you’ve tried to move on.”

“Why doesn’t Mom like her, Lex?”

“I dunno. She told me she was kind of an asshole. She said it after Romeo and her took their road trip to Pensacola Beach a few months ago. They stopped in and spent a few nights with Mom and Dad. I’m not sure if she told you about it or not.”

I know about the trip. My mom slipped up and mentioned she was getting the spare room ready and making a chicken pot pie for dinner because it’s Romeo’s favorite. I lay awake for two nights in a row, fantasizing about flying down to Florida and forcibly throwing him out of my house. I lay awake for weeks afterward, fantasizing about flying down and doing something entirely different to him. “There’s no way Mom said asshole.”

“She did. Her exact words were, ‘That Selby’s one hell of an asshole.’” I laugh out loud in shock and jubilation as my heart swells. I’ve always loved my mom. She’s one of my favorite people. We’ve always had a good relationship, but I can categorically say I have never loved her more than I do right now.

“She said she didn’t like the way she treated Romeo. Something about talking over him or for him, I can’t remember which. She said she’s one of those women that high school mean girls turn into.” Lexi, on the other hand, is one of those people who’s all kinds of cagey, but once she starts talking, has the tendency to word vomit. There’s another slight pause. A tentativeness that makes her speak softer. “She said Romeo seems unhappy.”

I head to the kitchen after I finish the call with Lexi, brain buzzing so loudly it feels set to explode. It’s Friday. I’ve been at Casa de Blanc for four days and nights. Between the three of us, we seem to have achieved something resembling balance. Selby leaves for work early and usually gets home late. She’s a lawyer and thus very busy and, by her own assertion, important, and not one to miss the opportunity to remind everyone of that. School’s out, so Romeo is home every day. He gardens fervently, taking breaks only to eat and throw himself into the pool when the heat gets unbearable. I beat a path from his house to my house so I can be “on-site,”

which, according to Selby, is a matter of life and death and absolutely critical to the project's success. Once there, I take a few photographs and send them to our family WhatsApp group chat, ask stupid questions, get underfoot, start coughing and spluttering from the dust, and then head back to Romeo's house, a little more defeated each day.

It's not what I'd call poetic, but there's a certain rhythm to it all the same.

When I get back to Romeo's, we shuffle around and try not to say anything inflammatory to each other.

Romeo's thick, icy veneer seems to be wearing thin. He kept his distance on Wednesday after the strange "*You still think that was your mistake*" business the day before, but he forgot to brush his hair all day. Selby noticed the second she walked in the door and smiled as though she found it charming, but he disappeared soon after and came downstairs with his hair plastered down a little while later.

Yesterday, he changed the pace a little, spending most of the day indoors, sitting at the desk by the bay window overlooking the front garden. He had pages laid out all over the desk, all of them covered in his tiny, tightly curled scrawl. He started working before I left to inspect the progress at our house, and he was still busy by the time I got back. He'd drawn colorful squiggles all over several pages and long red lines with big arrows on some of the others.

Curiosity got the better of me.

"What are you writing?" I'd asked.

He'd seemed surprised to see me even though I'd called out to him when I arrived. "I'm not writing. I'm just...making notes."

I'd toyed with the idea of explaining to him that those two things were one and the same but thought better of it because of how he looked. And how he felt. And how it felt to be near him.

His eyes were big, glazed over in that dreamy blue way that used to tie me in knots. The way that still ties me in knots. The mood around him was calm. So peaceful it felt like we were in the eye of a storm. Like bad weather had been raging for years but had suddenly fallen still. It was so serene and tranquil that it almost made me believe the storm would peter out and the eyewall of the backside would evaporate and spare us.

He worked for hours, writing things down and then crossing them out. Moving pages around and then back again. I sat on the sofa and read. Or I pretended to read. What I really did was watch Romeo and wonder where

he was, where his imagination had taken him, and what it was like there. I offered him tea once when, really, what I wanted to say was, “*Take me with you. Wherever you go, Romeo, take me there too.*”

When Selby came home, she took one look at Romeo and said, “Jesus.”

She broke the word into two distinct syllables and said it on the back of a forced outward breath. Then she turned to me, fixed me with a brilliant smile, and asked how my day had been.

This morning, Romeo is back at the desk, and Selby is running late. She’s in the kitchen in business attire, with a towel still wrapped around her head.

“Can I make you something to eat?” I offer.

Yeah, yeah. That’s right. I hate her, but my mother, a saintly woman who refers to my mortal enemy as an asshole, raised me well. I have manners. I know how to be a good house guest.

“Oh my God,” she says. “That would be amazing.”

Fuck.

Now, I actually have to do it.

“How ’bout some eggs? How do you like them?”

“Poached, please.” She pulls a cute little kissy face at me. One that I suspect has got her what she wants a lot in her life. I hardly have words to describe how immune I am.

I walk over to where Romeo sits and put my hand on the desk to gently bring him back to Earth. He blinks as if he wasn’t expecting to see me, and his eyes soften in a way that makes Stupid Me think maybe he’s happy to see me. Maybe he’s missed me like I’ve missed him. Maybe his life doesn’t make sense without me either.

It’s a notion that’s obviously more a symptom of my declining mental health than anything else.

“How ’bout you,” I say. “How’d you want your eggs?”

Romeo’s lips start parting to speak. “Oh, he’ll have poached too,” says Selby with a dismissive little wave. “I’m just going to run upstairs to do my hair, but the pans are in that drawer and...oh, you know what, just get Romeo to help you with anything else you need.”

Romeo gets up and pads into the kitchen. We move around each other in a way that doesn’t feel forced. I make the eggs, and he makes the coffee. I put the toast in the toaster, and he catches it when it pops and butters it while it’s hot.

By the time Selby gets down, we're sitting at the kitchen counter and breakfast is ready.

When Selby has eaten and is ready to head to work, she raises her eyebrows high and says, "Now, Rome. Just a gentle reminder to *use* the wicker baskets I bought for you to store all *that* in." She points to the desk, grimacing slightly, then, to ensure there's no misunderstanding, she adds, "Not next to. *In*."

She leans down and kisses him on the cheek. For the first time in a long time, I don't let myself look away when she does it. I watch as she leans down. I see her soft, pouty lips pucker. I see Romeo too. It's not that he flinches as such. He barely even moves. It's that there's something robotic about him. Something practiced. He receives the kiss. He doesn't brush it off or squirm out of it. But his eyes don't change at all when it happens. There's no warmth in them. No creases at the corners. Not even fine ones.

My heart starts to pound.

Holy shit.

What if my mom is right. What if Selby really is an asshole. What if it's a fact. What if the way I feel about her isn't just because she took the thing I love most from me. What if it's not just because she wore white and smiled beatifically as she did it, with no fucking clue she was killing me. I've hated her for so long and with such passion that, for years, I haven't been sure whether she really is terrible or I'm just a sad, jealous fuck who can't accept that I can't have what I want.

What if Selby really is awful?

As the day wears on, a new, terrible, wild, crazy feeling starts gnawing at me.

What if Romeo is unhappy with her?

“THAT ALL THE WORLD WILL BE IN LOVE WITH NIGHT”

THEN

I COULD FEEL WHERE Romeo had been when I moved. When I sat down. When I laughed or clenched my ass. The tenderness was with me for the whole of the next day and most of the one after that too.

I loved it.

I fucking lived for it.

To me, it was evidence. Proof I'd been with Romeo. Proof he was my lover. Proof life was good and the future was yet to be written.

There was a strangeness between us. No, not a strangeness. An awareness. A newness.

I didn't think Romeo was comfortable talking about what had happened between us, and truthfully, neither was I. It was so far out of the bounds of friendship and the realm of anything that had happened between us before that it was hard to find words to make sense of it. But it was there, winding its way around us and through us. There was a tension, a decadent pull, that put pressure on every part of my body. Every second was heightened. I was waiting. Anticipating. Expecting my turn. We both knew it would happen. We just didn't know when.

By Saturday night, I couldn't take it. I felt sure I'd go insane if I didn't have him or if I somehow fucked it up and things went back to normal between us. It was the last night before my parents came home, which put a rush on things. I knew it. He knew it too. He could feel it the same way I did. I knew he could.

Fuck. I swear I thought he felt it too.

Eventually, I cracked. It was late, maybe ten or eleven. I was lying on my bed, still fully dressed, when I plucked up enough courage to send Romeo a message.

So, when's my turn?

He replied so fast I allowed myself to believe he'd been sitting in his room, phone in hand, waiting for me to ask.

Is your window open?

A rush of warmth, love, and lust bloomed in my chest as I read his words. I replied with the only word I ever used in reply to that question. One word. Six letters.

Always.

I pushed my window open completely. It was a balmy night. One of those nights that's so warm and still that it's hard to tell the difference in temperature between the air on your skin and the blood in your veins. A night that carried a promise, a possibility, of changing my life. I breathed it in, and when I stepped back, a slight breeze caused my curtains to billow around me.

I showered hurriedly in very hot water. I hardly felt it. I didn't use cologne, and I dried my hair roughly with a towel, ensuring it was dry enough that Romeo wouldn't think I'd made too much effort for him. I put on my favorite pair of jeans and left the top button open. My feet were bare, sinking into the carpet as I paced around my room. I straightened my bed, switched off the overhead light, and switched my table lamp on. That was too bright, so I turned the table lamp off too. Too dark.

I fumbled with the switch behind my nightstand and plugged in the Himalayan salt lamp Lexi had given me for Christmas the year before. A gentle pink-peach glow warmed the space. The mish-mash of posters above my bed glinted where the light hit them. I was pleased. It was moody but still light enough that I'd be able to see everything. Even in my addled state, I knew that was important. I knew it was a night I wanted to remember.

I sat on the edge of my bed with my hands balled into fists in my lap and listened keenly for anything other than the battering ram that was my heart. My soul almost left my body when I heard the hollow *thunk* of Romeo's footsteps on the garage roof. It felt like I'd come full circle. Like I'd been waiting all my life for this moment. Romeo's silhouette filled the window and

his shadow spilled onto the floor. A sprinkling of stars lit the night sky behind him like a halo. He was the night. He was light and dark woven together. He was quiet moments coated in stardust. He was perfect. He was everything I'd ever wanted. Everything I would ever want. He climbed in through the window, crouching and stepping in with his usual feline ease, and pulled his shirt off over his head before he'd fully straightened.

That shocked me. I'd expected him to be awkward and both of us to be a bit spluttery and unsure. I thought we'd stand around trying to think of things to say to each other and that I'd need to jump through hoops in some way to convince him this was a good idea. It was nothing like that. It was more like two magnets that had been held apart for as long as they could be.

Romeo was devastating shirtless. Half of him bathed in the cool blue of the moon, the other half glowing from the lamp on my nightstand. His skin was smooth. Silk draped over taut muscle. There were fine indents on his arms and shoulders and a suggestion of a line down his torso. His nipples were small and pink. Hard from the breeze outside. Or hard from me. I wasn't sure which. He looked sheepish, mischievous, maybe. His mouth twisted in that little sideways quirk, but his eyes were shadowed darkly. There was something new and endless in them. Something I wanted. I got so lost in his eyes that I hardly noticed him undoing his pants and pushing them down.

I definitely noticed when they hit the ground. Believe me. I noticed that.

Romeo was in my bedroom. And he was stark naked.

I was dry-mouthed and paralyzed, and I wasn't sure if I should attempt to get off the bed or wait for him to come to me. I had no idea what the social norm for things like that was. I started to panic, my face warming and making things worse. Fortunately, my legs decided for me, launching me up and propelling me toward Romeo, not stopping until we stood toe-to-toe. My hands floated up and found their way into his hair. It was thick and coarse between my fingers. Cool from the night air. He looked up at me and smiled as I leaned in to kiss him. It was one of those kisses that brought thunder on contact. The world darkened and a low rumble sounded in the distance.

Romeo parted his lips, yielding to me, and I licked into his mouth. Our tongues rubbed together. Slippery roughness against slippery roughness. My hands were everywhere. In his hair, on his face and neck, and all over his body, tearing at his flesh and then caressing it softly. He reached between us, shoving me back just enough to undo my zipper. It gave me a little shock. A little warning that this wasn't my imagination at play. It was real. It took both of us to get my jeans off. I was tugging them down as he was unzipping. It

was messy and much harder than it should have been. When it was done, when we were both naked, something changed.

I lowered my chin and widened my stance.

Romeo tilted his face to me, eyes dancing with humor and warning, and said, “Easy, Tiger.”

He gave me a look I knew well—the tightness in his top lip, the single arched brow. It was how he looked right before he cracked a belly laugh, and I loved him for that. It sliced through the tension in the room and made unfamiliar things feel familiar. It made new things feel like they’d happened a hundred times before.

We were standing close to each other, so I didn’t have much space for a run-up, but that didn’t stop me. I put my head down, my arms out, and tackled him onto my bed. We both fell, laughing hysterically. There were hands, feet, and bony knees all over the place. There was naked skin everywhere too. I pinned Romeo easily, holding him down by both wrists.

He didn’t resist.

Not even a little.

Our laughter faded abruptly the second our bodies made contact. We were face-to-face. Dick-to-dick. I held myself up on my hands and elbows and rolled my hips against his. I shuddered on contact. His dick was hot to touch and hard, solid steel against mine.

Mine liked it a lot.

I ground against him again and his eyelids grew heavy and slid to half-mast as I watched. His jaw was slack, but his gaze didn’t leave mine.

I leaned down and kissed him again. Slow and sweet that time. Time slipped when we touched. Slid. Tore. It took us to a different place. A new place. A place where the air was thick and life was as sweet and heady as Romeo’s kisses.

The kiss seemed to last forever, a warm, gooey cascade of goodness that washed over me again and again. Every brush of his lips on mine tasted like more. Every light stamp gave rise to another. Neither of us could stop it. When I tried to lift my head, Romeo wound his hands around the back of my neck and pulled me closer.

When the kiss finally ended, my blood had run thick, my thoughts slow and cumbersome. My lips were hot and chaffed.

Nothing existed but the man in my bed.

My Romeo.

He lay on his back and watched thoughtfully as I reached over and got the lube from my nightstand. He bit his bottom lip and quirked it at the same time. I remember him like that so clearly that if I close my eyes, I can still see it.

He was nervous, but he also wasn't. I'd seen Romeo nervous often enough that I knew how to spot signs of his anxiety at a hundred yards with ease. This wasn't that. It was more like anticipation. More like excitement. It flickered in his eyes, spinning the kaleidoscope so hard and fast it made me dizzy.

He didn't roll over, which surprised me, so I guess I'd been expecting to take him on all fours the way he'd taken me. He stayed as he was, his glorious head nestled into my pillow, cocked slightly in my direction as I spread lube on my fingers. He opened his legs for me when I was ready, spreading his knees wide, leaving the soles of his feet resting close together. He did it without me nudging or asking at all. The sight of him like that was a gut punch of arousal so strong I had to press my lips together to stifle a moan.

I wanted to kiss every inch of his skin, to caress it, bite it, and claim it as mine. I wanted to start and never stop. I wanted to lick him and love him and worship his body. I wanted to make it so there'd never be anyone else for Romeo as long as he lived.

I didn't do it though. I couldn't. I was hampered by the ridiculousness that was our little "practicing sex on each other" façade. Held back by the fact there was a blurred line between us, and I knew I had to toe that line or risk crossing over and dropping straight into the category of *too much*.

Too close.

Too gay.

I did stroke him though. I knelt between his legs and lifted his dick as it lay swollen and stretched out on his belly, slowly sliding my left hand up and down his length as my right hand moved lower. I ran my fingers up and down his crease. I felt the change in temperature as I got closer to what I wanted. Body heat changing to *body heat*. I let my fingers wander until I found what I wanted. It was a little lower than I'd expected and a lot more sensitive if the way his eyes slammed shut on contact was anything to go by. I felt the tiny creases holding him closed against the pad of my finger, and fuck me, I wanted it. I wanted him. Like that. On his back. Legs spread. I wanted to open him. To fill him. That was the fantasy. That was what I wanted. What I'd wanted for as long as it'd been decent for me to want such things.

I touched him like that on the outside for a while, taking my time, giving him light touches and soft nudges. I did it until his hips rolled and his dick

strained and thickened in my hand, then I slid my middle finger into him. He was tight and impossibly hot. So hot it felt magic, not human. His body reacted immediately. A hard jolt followed by a strong tug. A push and a pull. His ring clenched and squeezed, sucking me in as I worked my finger into him. He was smooth inside, tight and elastic, and fuck, I loved that. He was hot silk I'd made slippery.

I added another finger, which he accepted with only the barest of flinches. I watched his face as I moved inside him, finding my way, feeling him up. Mapping out every day of the rest of my life. I swiveled my fingers inside him, and when I dared, I crooked them toward me. The first time, he gasped. The second, he sighed. The third, he set the world on fire. His abs clenched and his neck arched. His chest lifted clear off the bed, and his moan ricocheted off all four walls and the ceiling and hit me right in the chest.

That was it.

That was the moment.

That was the second this version of me was born. The one that exists because Romeo exists. The one that breathes because he does. The one who knows nothing but longing and pain.

The one that can't stop loving him no matter how much I try to hate him.

The sound he made was unlike anything I'd ever heard, but it was a sound I knew. My soul knew it. I swear it did. I recognized it and replied with a low answer I made just for him.

Things changed then. Time faltered again, but this time, it didn't recover. It mutated into this hot, thick thing that sank to the floor and moved through the room. It ran through my veins, stirring my arms and my hips, taking control of me and snaking my body over Romeo's, caging him with my hands on either side of him as he lay beneath me. His knees dropped back onto his chest as if it were easy. As if it wasn't new. As if it was something we'd done many times before.

I dipped my head down and ran my nose along his. "Are you sure?" I asked, terrified he'd say no and somehow also terrified he'd say yes.

"A deal's a deal," he answered with a textbook Romeo shrug. He looked sure, but he sounded strange, as if his chest were tight and he found it as hard to breathe as I did.

He reached between his legs and guided me into him as if that were easy too. His hips rose to meet me as I drilled into heaven. A quick hiss and the appearance of little lines around his eyes said it wasn't easy to take me. As always, I felt his pain as if it were my own and winced. I tried to stop, to back

up, but I couldn't because Romeo was pulling me down. His arms and legs were wrapped around me, holding me tightly, cocooning me, a gravitational force I was powerless to resist.

I looked down at him to make sure he was okay. He nodded and his eyes said yes. They said he wanted more. I'd never seen them like that. Naked. Pupils blown out so big that they almost looked black. Tiny sparks in the dark with endless constellations buried inside them.

His jaw worked repeatedly, teeth sinking into a fleshy bottom lip each time I thrust. The sounds he made were sweet and soft and a little bit strangled. I was strangled too. Ecstasy had me in a chokehold. I was mainlining pleasure. Gulping it down. Swallowing every morsel I could find. Licking his neck and kissing his mouth as I moved with a care and gentleness I hadn't known I possessed. The world was on a knife-edge. Every breath seemed to matter. Every second. Every touch. It all felt new and old and completely addictive. The only thing I wanted was to make Romeo feel good. I wanted that more than I'd ever wanted anything. I searched his face and nearly turned inside out when I saw nothing but pleasure. His eyes were frozen, fire, locked on mine. Not moving. Not blinking.

I clung to him and onto the edge for as long as I could. I kept thrusting until my mind went vacant and white spots appeared in my field of vision. Until pleasure started to change and feel other. Until Romeo reached between us and started frantically jacking his dick. There was an urgency to his actions that matched the roar of blood pumping through my body. His ring began to spasm around me, a dull pause and tight clench that forcibly dragged my orgasm closer to the surface. Closer and closer. So close I felt the seam ripping. I felt myself tearing. Breaking. Shooting. Thick, boiling love and lust shot out of me and into him. I pushed it in deeper and deeper, hips grinding against him in helpless spasms until he cried out and the space between his body and mine was warm and slick too.

Afterward, he looked like he was floating. He stayed on his back with one leg splayed over mine and didn't move. His arms were limp at his sides, palms up, hands open. His chest rose and fell at semi-regular intervals and his mouth was ajar. He didn't seem to be able to do anything about it. I lay by his side and breathed him in. The entire room was laced with his scent. I could smell his skin and what we'd done. Gentle waves of pleasure surged through me when I inhaled, and until I lost my battle with sleep, all I could taste was Romeo's kisses.

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“FORTUNES FOOL”

Now

SELBY GETS HOME TO find Romeo has not used the wicker baskets she instructed him to. Instead, the pages he’s working on remain strewn all over his desk. To make matters worse, the fruits of today’s efforts have been added to yesterday’s pages. Not only are they not stacked next to the baskets. They’re not stacked at all.

She’s not happy about it. She pinches her mouth into a tight line, sets her bag down on the kitchen counter, and marches over with purpose. Despite telling myself in no uncertain terms to stay out of it, I pull myself up from where I’ve been lying on the sofa and peek over the back to see what’s happening.

She’s giving him hell. Quiet, hissing hell. He’s letting it bounce off him, but as it goes on, I notice his shoulders drooping. The rage it incites in me is the same as it was then. The same as it was when teachers yelled his name or people upset him. It’s instant. A hot rip that’s so intense I have a physical reaction to it. My face changes. The beast is awakened. Romeo recognizes it as soon he sees it.

He looks at me and gives me an almost imperceptible shake of his head.

It’s not worth it, the air around him whispers.

It is fucking worth it, so I get up and stalk over to where they are and turn to Selby.

“I think Romeo’s still working on that,” I say with a bright smile I learned from her.

She rolls her eyes angrily before remembering she's a wonderful hostess and I'm a beloved guest in their home. She quickly corrects. "Oh, you," she says, whacking my arm just a little harder than a playful whack calls for. "You've always been like this, haven't you? Thick as thieves, you two. But fine, have it your way. He can keep it out, but you better make sure *you're* the one to help him tidy it up because I'm not available to do it."

She heads upstairs to change out of her work clothes, leaving a strange mood in her wake. Her absence feels big in the room. Big, but welcome. I feel distinctly told off. I really do. I've been scolded. Corrected. Put in my place by someone who believes they're the boss of me. I feel exactly how I used to when Romeo and I were kids and we'd get in trouble at school. The same thing happens now as happened then.

A small, rough snort leaves me and Romeo's shoulders shake. He surreptitiously clamps a hand to his mouth and his eyes bulge slightly.

We look at each other and time doesn't matter. We laugh the way we laughed then. Loud, unhinged cackles spray out of us, interspersed by wheezes and gasps and weird, pained howls.

"Shh," hisses Romeo, panicking like he always did when this happened.

I don't stop laughing. He doesn't either. We laugh and laugh until we're so weak we have to lean against each other for balance. His shoulder touches my shoulder, digging into me, reminding me of everything.

Reminding me that Romeo is everything.

I slide my hand up his back and hook my arm casually around his neck. It's an old, instinctive move. Something that's happened so many times it's written into my bones. I freeze the second it's done. I'm a fool. One who is suddenly, painfully, brutally aware that this is now, not then. I wait in red-hot discomfort for him to snarl and push me away.

He doesn't.

He turns toward me the slightest amount. The tiniest bit. Just a degree or so, but holy fuck, I feel it. His body, his presence, near mine. In my orbit. My atmosphere. In the air I breathe. He tilts his head, and for one, maybe two seconds, he rests it lightly against mine. My knees almost give way with relief.

For the first time in years, I'm home.



Romeo is grilling burgers. Selby's bounced back, smile firmly back in place, and is on the patio supervising him as she sips a glass of Sauvignon Blanc. I'm sitting next to her, watching Romeo. Tiger sits at his heel, looking up at him as if he hung the moon.

I know the feeling.

Now and again, Romeo leans down and says, "How many times do we have to go through this, boy? You know I can't pet you now. I'm cooking."

Tiger doesn't care. He doesn't give a quarter of a shit. The smell of grilled meat isn't the main event for him, it's simply nice to have. He's happy because he's with Romeo.

"Should I put him inside?" Selby asks for the second time. Romeo waves her off again, and she says, "Ugh," under her breath.

She chatters away, filling the silence with tidbits about the week she just had at work, and I manage to string together a few semi-intelligent-sounding sentences about what I do for a living. I'm finding it hard to concentrate. Romeo is wearing an apron and humming to himself now. The apron is beige with splashes of dirty pink and sage green. It's covered in faded florals, and fuck me dead, he wears it well. Every now and then, he gives a couple of the burgers a little bop with his tongs in time to the song playing in his head.

I sincerely don't want to find him adorable. Believe me, I don't. It's the last thing on Earth I need. And I sure as hell don't want to be looking at him like this while I'm sitting next to his wife. Any asshole could tell you that's a terrible idea.

Yet here we are.

I shift in my seat and adjust myself when Selby gets up to let Romeo know she thinks the burgers are done. Romeo leaves them on for another couple of minutes, and for some childish reason, that amuses me greatly. When all parties are happy with the state of burger readiness, he brings them to the table, takes off his apron, folds it, and hangs it over the back of his chair before sitting opposite me.

“Looks great,” I say.

Selby and I assemble our burgers quickly and tuck in. Romeo takes his time. He sandwiches his burger between two slices of cheese and two slices of tomatoes and then painstakingly arranges his pickles so that every bite he takes will have some pickle.

I forgot he did that.

He always did it. Sal used to build burgers like that. She taught him how. She used to shake her head at the haphazard way I made them and say, “No offense, buddy, but his is the only way to make a good burger.”

Then she’d take my plate from me and make one of her good burgers for me. I loved it.

And I forgot about it. A blend of nostalgia and sadness hits me. If this was then and not now, I’d talk about Sal. I’d say, “Remember when she did this,” or “Remember when she said that,” and we’d laugh and maybe even cry, but at least we’d remember. At least it would feel like she happened and was real.

Selby and I have eaten at least half of our burgers by the time Romeo is satisfied with the assembly of his. He lifts it in both hands, long, graceful fingers caging it firmly as he brings it to his mouth. He pauses and smiles at it. Then he closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and bites into it. I see a glimpse of teeth and tongue. A flash of white and a hint of pink wetness. He bites hard and decisively, canines and incisors ripping through bread and meat. There’s something so carnal about it that I drop my head and look away quickly.

Fuck.

I’m floundering. I’m being fucking stupid. I’m openly lusty after a married man as his wife sits at the table right next to me. Surely to God, not even my dumbest self can think this is acceptable.

I’m about to launch into giving myself a very serious and clearly much-needed lecture when I feel a sharp kick on the shin. Romeo is still chewing and eyeing his burger as if he wants to make out with it, but he glances up and gives me a look that quickly alerts me to the fact that Selby is talking to me. I manage to rejoin the conversation just in time to piece together that she’s asking about Sam.

“...think he’ll come out here while you’re here? Three weeks is a long time to be apart when a relationship is still new, and we’d love to meet...”

“Uh, yeah, no. No, he won’t be coming out. We’re actually, well, we broke up.”

“Oh noooo!” she wails. “That’s awful. I’m so sorry to hear that. You poor thing. Romeo said he was very good-looking.”

“I didn’t say he was *very* good-looking,” says Romeo.

“Well, you said he was good-looking, and that’s kind of the same thing coming from you.”

Romeo’s face flicks through emotions so fast I have a hard time deciphering them. I wasn’t looking at him when I said Sam and I broke up. I was looking at Selby. By the time I did look at Romeo, all I caught was the tail end of something unreadable. His features were lax and he seemed to be exhaling a breath he’d been holding for a long time. They changed radically a split second later when Selby spoke, hardening and tightening so much he looked like he did when I first got to Alabaster.

The conversation is stilted, but fortunately, Selby’s here, and she’s banging on about fish in the sea and cutting people loose if they aren’t a good fit. At one point, I’m pretty sure she says something about how lucky I am that men are much easier to get than women, though don’t quote me on that.

I hate everything about this entire conversation so much it’s making me itchy.

I slap at my ankles and start to scratch.

“Let’s go inside,” says Romeo. “Jude’s being eaten.”

I offer to do the dishes, and Selby decides to head upstairs to take a bath.

“Need help?” asks Romeo.

“Nah, you cooked. I’m good to clean.”

He sits on the sofa, kicking his feet up on an ottoman and changing channels until he finds something to watch. I take my time in the kitchen, loading the dishwasher and wiping every surface that can tolerate wiping, grateful to have something useful to do. When I can’t think of another thing to clean, I sit on the sofa with Romeo. It’s huge. White, obviously, and sitting on it is exactly like what I imagine throwing yourself into a cloud would be like. It’s so comfortable that before long, I find myself sliding down and curling on my side with a couple of plush throw cushions propped under my head.

Romeo is sitting near my feet and watching an anime demon slayer-type show with tiny English subtitles. I have no idea what’s going on and find it

a little hard to follow. I also have no idea why I'm sitting here at all. It's late enough that I could easily plead exhaustion and go to bed.

Well. That's not true, is it?

I know exactly why I'm here. Romeo's watching TV, and as always, I'm watching Romeo.

It's sad. Pitiful, really, that after all this time, I'd still do almost anything to be near him.

It's just that when we're like this, quiet, with the lights low and the sound of the TV gently jarring my conscious thoughts, it's easy to let my mind drift to a place long ago, where nothing bad had happened and our biggest problem was what to put on a sandwich. A time when being close to Romeo was the most comfortable I could be, the happiest, most content it was possible for me to feel.

I let my eyes drift shut and lengthen my breathing, letting myself slip into the vortex between then and now, and though I know damn well it's delusional, fuck me, it feels good. Every bone in my body feels different. Like the steel pins holding me together have been warmed and started to melt. I don't move and I don't think. I just breathe.

In

Out

In

Out

Romeo's voice finds me through a thick fog. It's soft like always, husky too, floating through space to find me. I know this voice. He's not speaking quietly because he's shy or unsure. He's speaking quietly because he doesn't want anyone else to hear what he has to say.

"So, what happened with Sam?"

"Um..." I'm not really sure what to say. *I came back here after five years away, took one look at your face, and couldn't bear to be with him again?* No. Can't go with that. "It just didn't work out."

He mulls it over and then shifts minutely, letting the leg closest to me fall open slightly. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I breathe.

He turns his face back to the TV and my proximity to him makes me itchy again. At first, it's enough for me to take turns rubbing one foot over the other to sate it, but soon, the contact makes the itch worse. Before long, I'm forced to reach down and rake my nails over my ankles.

One scratch turns into two. Two quickly turn into three.

“Stop scratching.” There’s an old smile in his words.

I stop, bringing my hand up and tucking it under my arm.

I hold out for as long as possible, but now that I’ve started, I can’t stop. My skin is crawling.

Fucking mosquitoes! Little shits won’t be happy until they’ve drained me bone dry. Until all that’s left of me is a corpse. Not even a beautiful corpse. A red, blotchy, shriveled-up prune of a corpse.

I reach down again, moving my hand slowly and carefully so Romeo won’t see. He does. He pounces, quick as a cat, batting my hand away and grabbing my foot by the ankle. It’s a rough action that startles me. He pulls my foot onto his lap and holds it tightly. Possessively. As if it’s his. His fingers wrap almost all the way around it. A cuff. An anchor. Lines smudge and begin to vibrate where he touches me. My skin burns, but I don’t move.

“When did you break up?” he asks after so long I can’t quite remember what we were talking about.

“Uh...” *Fuck. What do I do? The truth or a lie? Quickly! The truth or a lie?* “The day after I got here.”

He’s quiet again, but not for nearly as long. “The day after we saw each other?”

“Yes.” I fully expected myself to deny it or at least sound deathly embarrassed about it. I don’t. I sound strangely sure of myself. Resigned and a little disheartened, but certain.

In the low, flickering light, I’m only just able to make out the tiniest quirk of a lip. A little side movement. Up and to the right. He pushes the hem of my jeans up just enough that my ankle bone is exposed. Electricity sparks and crackles, and I become extremely aware that I might not have full command of my legs right now. The pad of a thumb traces lines over and around my ankle. It finds the worst bite, the one driving me insane, and crosses it lightly.

Selby’s voice finds us in the dark, nasal and no-nonsense. “Romeo! Are you coming to bed?”

I tense at the sound. Romeo doesn’t. Instead, he worries my bad bite again, lightly and then hard, crossing it by digging his nail into my flesh this time. Marking it with an X.

Yearning, desire, and stinging heat slice into me.

“You still have sweet blood...” he whispers, and I lie on my side, one with the sofa, paralyzed, praying to a God I no longer believe in—*Please, please, please, dear Lord, please let him say it. Please let him say it. Please let him remember. Please*—“...Sweet Potato.”

With that, he’s gone, a whisp of night spiriting across the room, and I’m left reeling right where I am. Lame. Lava. Bones liquid, melted together by an idiotic mix of relief and something way, way more stupid.

He remembers.

It’s so fucking silly, but it matters to me. And he remembers.

As soon as I’m able to scrape myself off the sofa, I hot-foot it to my room and call Lexi. I give her a feverish play-by-play of the evening, going into excessive detail, even for me.

“So wait, his eyes went funny before or after you said you and Sam had broken up?”

“Jesus, Lex, get it together. We were at the table. He was across from me. He was looking right at me and his eyes went all watery and calm when I said it, and then...”

“And then a split second later, they turned to thunder.” She sounds mildly bored, and I can’t say I blame her. “Yeah, yeah, I got that part.”

I’ve been through all this three times already and have yet to adequately find a way to convey the minutiae of Romeo’s facial expressions and how they changed when Selby said Sam was good-looking. For some reason, it’s absolutely essential to me that Lexi understands this, so I’m about to start from the top and have another go when it dawns on me just how unhinged I sound. And I haven’t even gotten to the sofa, the bites, my renewed faith in the Lord, or the Sweet Potato business yet.

“Oh God. You think I’ve gone crazy, don’t you?”

She’s quiet for a second, and I can almost hear her nodding down the line. “I think your grip on reality is a little shaky, yes.”

I give that the chuckle it deserves and then sigh as she offers to come and save me from myself. “Do you want me to come out? You know I only have two days of leave left, but I’d still be happy to come.” She went on a trip to Brazil in the spring and used most of her leave then. That’s why I’m here and not her. “I could fly out tomorrow and spend Monday and Tuesday with you. I’ll call Mom and Dad, let them know that one of them *has* to come up and take over from you. It’s a fucking emergency. You can’t be in Alabaster by yourself. And you can’t be under his roof. It’s too much.”

I sigh heavily. The thought of my sister swooping in and handling this whole Romeo nightmare for me does have enormous appeal, but I shake my head and say, “No, I’m fine. I mean, I will be fine. In a few years, I’ll be fine. It’s called closure, Lex, or something like that.”

“Okay,” she says, “if you’re sure.” Then, she starts telling me how she’s been. There’s a new guy, Todd, in her team at work, and so far, we’ve been on the fence about him. “I’m telling you, Jude, he came into his own on Friday.” She pauses, and a muffled sound lets me know she’s settling in, tucking her feet under herself to get comfortable. Tea is about to be spilled. “So, we were in the boardroom and Leslie was running the meeting, and you know what she’s like.” We’re not on the fence about Leslie. She’s toxic and we hate everything about her. “And you know that thing where you point to your own mouth to show someone they have something on theirs?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, Todd did that to Leslie, and she brushed it off and ignored him. So he did it again, more insistently. She ignored him again. Finally, he says, ‘You have some ketchup on your top lip there, Leslie.’ And she’s like, ‘No, I don’t, Todd. It’s a cold sore.’”

I hoot and writhe on my bed in secondhand embarrassment. “Noooo! Oh God. Did he resign on the spot?”

“He looked like he was giving it some serious thought, but no. He’s still gainfully employed, but he’s no longer as chipper as he was when he started, and that’s a *huge* improvement. I think I probably definitely like him now. He’s all right, old Todd. He has the potential to be interesting, you know.”

“Well, that’s good news, I suppose. Not for Todd, but for you.”

“It is.” We cackle a bit at what assholes we are and start making moves to wind the conversation up. Before we hang up, Lexi’s tone changes, and she says, “Jude. You know men don’t leave their wives for their...holy shit, what’s the male equivalent of the word mistress? No! Do not tell me there’s no word for that!” I can tell she’s milliseconds from launching herself headlong into an epic feminist rant, and as much as I consider myself a die-hard feminist, it’s getting late, I’m tired, and the patriarchy will still be full of shit tomorrow.

“There isn’t. But point taken, say no more.”

I definitely don’t need to hear more. I’m ashamed she feels the need even to say this much. Of course she’s right. Romeo is married. He’s been

married for five years, and he and Selby are considering having kids. They are very, very married. Those are the facts.

How he looked at me across a dinner table is neither here nor there. Of course it isn't. I appear to have taken a brief trip to the land of Delulu tonight, I admit it, but no more. Lexi's right. Men don't leave their wives for their mistresses, and in this case, the man in question didn't want me when he had me, so why, in God's name, I'm letting myself get caught up in the tiniest, most grasping-at-straws details of a completely inane interaction, I can't possibly imagine. Even my most delusional self can't concoct a half-decent explanation.

"Kay, night."

"Night." My finger hovers over the End button, but just before I hit it, I say, "Hey, Lex, can I let you know if I change my mind? You know, about you flying out here?"

"Of course you can, Brother. Anytime. Just shout, and I'll be on my way."

Lexi rarely calls me Brother. I think she saves it up for special occasions so it packs a punch when she does say it. It levels me and reminds me of the unshakable bond we have. A bond forged in a childhood littered with fights to near-death about things that don't matter and never did. A bond that comes from living under the same roof with the same embarrassing parents and knowing the best and worst about each other. But mostly, reminds me that our bond is forged in blood.

I respond the same way I always do when she says it.

"I love you, Sister."

“I GAVE THEE MINE BEFORE THOU DIDST REQUEST IT”

THEN

THE SECOND YEAR OF college was better than the first, but I still spent my time with one foot in Ohio and the other in Alabaster. I canceled plans and left debaucherous nights early to ensure I was in a quiet place where I could hear Romeo talking when he called. He still called all the time. Every day. It was the same as always, but it was different for me. The way I felt about him had started to hurt. I missed him in a way that left me in physical pain, chest ripped open, heart beating his name. I lay awake in bed, twisted and turned inside out at the thought of being in his body then and being away from him now. I thought of nothing else.

I was obsessed.

I lived for his calls. His husky voice. His soft, throaty laugh.

I was still the one he called when he was happy or sad, stressed or confused. I was the one he needed, and I loved it.

“Jesus Christ, Jude. The worst has happened. They want me to go to Waukegan. For fun.”

They were Sean and Kellie. They’d grown tired of small-town life and had started looking for opportunities to venture to nearby cities every chance they got.

“They’re already there. They’ve skipped their classes for the rest of the week and said I should drive up on Friday night and join them. Friday fucking night? I mean, are they insane? I have no idea where I’m going or what it will be like other than I presume traffic will be hell and the entire place will be full of fucking people. And that’s people I don’t know, not just regular people. Regular people are bad enough.” His voice lilted up an octave

or two. “I mean, I-I don’t even know what the parking situation will be like. Be realistic, people,” he all but wailed, “I’m not going *anywhere* if I don’t know what the parking situation is like.”

I laughed at his theatrics, and when I hung up, I did some research and dropped a pin to the parking lot nearest to where he’d been invited and sent it to him.

He replied right away.

You’re the best person I know, Tiger.

My heart expanded in my chest. Swelling and filling rapidly with every good thing I’d ever felt. I lay back on my bed and held my phone to my heart, smiling like a raving idiot, telling myself that things had changed for him too, conveniently ignoring the fact it was the same thing he’d said to me countless times before.

By the time summer finally rolled around, I all but floated home to Alabaster, carried by nothing but the beating wings of my foolish heart.

Romeo and I danced around each other for the first couple of weeks, spending every waking minute together but keeping our clothes on. It was torture. It was heaven and hell. It was so good to be near him that I went to bed most nights with a sweet taste in my mouth. It was agony too. Every casual touch, every chest bump, every shoulder shove set me alight.

I waited for him to make a move, too afraid to do it myself in case I overplayed my hand and showed Romeo I only had one card. The king of hearts. And he was it.

By the time he finally made his move, I was sure I was seconds from death. The torment of sexual desire and love that had nowhere to land had both had their way with me.

My phone pinged, and I nearly levitated when I saw his message. I forced myself to read it three times before I let myself believe it.

So, is it my turn to fuck again, or what?

No man alive has ever typed faster.

Yes. Your turn.

It was like before. He came to me in my room late at night and we took turns bottoming. Me, then him. Me, then him.

I guess I'm one of those people who only bottoms for love. I must be because I've never bottomed for anyone but Romeo. I haven't wanted to. I did it for him, and I loved it because it was something we did together. Him and me. I liked the sensation, it's not that I didn't, and Jesus, the Os were amazing, but for me, being inside Romeo was what I craved above everything else. And I really do mean everything else. I'm not talking about small things. I'm talking water and air. Shelter and breathing. Those kinds of things.

Sliding into him and feeling his body give way to accommodate me made me believe in magic. It made me believe I could fly, that mythical creatures and winged beasts were real, and I was The One who could tame them. It made me believe Romeo and I were the unsung heroes of our generation, the main characters in an epic fantasy saga. When my dick was inside him, and we were moving together, I truly believed we had the kind of love sonnets were written about.

At the same time, the uncertainty was agony, pure pain and anguish. The wait from one fuck to the next was the sweetest form of torture I've ever known. I wanted him all the time, so it seemed only sane to wait for him to make the first move. I thought of nothing else. I couldn't sleep, and when I did, I dreamed of Romeo bucking against me, moaning my name, falling apart in my arms. I woke up burning worse than when I fell asleep.

The day in question was a Tuesday. It was daytime. It had been four days since he'd bottomed for me, and it was my turn to take it. I'd woken up edgy and was waiting for him to come to me with an intensity that had mass. I could feel it in my bones and under my skin. The anticipation. The nervous excitement. I had a feeling that day was the day. Three or four days was about how long he seemed to go before he came back for more.

I thought I'd have to wait hours and hours until nighttime for any hope of anything happening, but Romeo came over to my place late morning. That wasn't unusual. It was normal for us to sleep in and then meet up at his place or mine for coffee and breakfast. What wasn't normal about that day was how Romeo looked when he arrived at our front door. He stood at the threshold, pausing and leaning against the doorway until I got up to check what was keeping him. His chin was drawn down and he looked up at me through thick, dark lashes. His jaw muscle tensed slightly, changing the shape of his face from sweet boy to sex.

"You coming in, or wha—" The word was cut in half by a flick of glass-bottle blue that hit me in the back of my throat.

He didn't answer. He just looked at me and then nodded slowly, kicking the front door closed behind him as he sauntered in. Something about him was different. I could tell. He was feline and sensual, letting his gaze roam down my body with no shame and no attempt to hide it. It unnerved me, but man, I liked it. He paused at my navel, teeth scraping over the swell of his bottom lip before releasing it, and then he tilted his head and let them travel lower.

I was hard, and I knew he could see it. For once, I didn't try to cover myself. I let him see. His eyes were still nowhere near mine when he reached into his back pocket and took out one of those lube sachets we'd taken to carrying around in our pockets. I thought he meant to use it on me. It was his turn to top, after all, but instead, he held it in his hand, sandwiched between his pointer and middle finger, and then held it out for me. He smiled easily, but not sweetly, as he unbuttoned his fly.

I remember a distinct feeling of confusion, a clatter of emotion that slowed my thought process substantially as I painstakingly pieced it together. His shorts were around his ankles, hands braced on the wall, sexy, soft twin semi-circles of his ass cheeks peeking out from under his T-shirt by the time it finally dawned on me.

Romeo wanted it.

I was instantly aroused. Not just aroused, more aroused than I'd ever been. More aroused than any man in living history had ever been. Red-hot lust bloomed in my groin and instantly invaded the rest of me.

He wanted me.

And he wanted to bottom for me more than he wanted to top.

It's hard to describe what that did to me or why. Let's just say I was euphoric. Ecstatic. Instantly riding the highest of highs. I don't remember prepping him, but I must have because I remember the sound he made when I entered him. It wasn't pain or even shock. It was a low, husky moan that shook the whole room. I moved slowly, gently sliding in and out of him, taking care to make him feel good. It went on for so long that I had the time to find the idiotic mental fortitude to congratulate myself on my stamina.

I was confused when he put his hand on my thigh and pushed me away, but I didn't have long to wonder what was happening. He kicked his shorts and shoes off and pulled me down to the floor right there in the hallway.

I was flat on my back and he was on top of me. The timber floor was cool and hard beneath me. He still had his T-shirt on. I had mine on too. My jeans were tangled around my ankles, binding me, trapping me. Keeping me right where he wanted me. He pushed my T-shirt up and raked one hand up and

down my chest, finding a handful of muscle and grabbing it hard. Grabbing it as if it were his. He reached behind him with his free hand and lined my cock up, fingers stretching and curling to caress my balls lightly.

His face as he impaled himself is something that still haunts me. Beauty is the best word to describe it, but really, the word is paltry in comparison to what I saw. His eyes were closed, his mouth open. His skin was flushed and golden, a fine sheen of sweat on his brow and neck. He sank down on me and took me fully. I felt the soft flesh of his ass cheeks resting on my thighs and the weight of his balls on my lower belly. He posted up and down, tentatively at first, face creased with concentration, and then something in him broke loose.

He found his rhythm. His pace. His speed. His place. His hips started moving in slow undulations. Sinuous and lithe. So sexy that time tore. It ripped down the middle and screeched to a halt. He leaned down and kissed me, and when he pulled away, his eyelids fluttered open and he looked drunk. Spaced out and happy.

That was it. That was the moment I thought would set the course for the rest of my life. Even now, I could swear it was real. I could swear as I lay there beneath him, I saw Romeo falling. Even now, after everything that happened, even though I know for a fact that's not what happened, a big, stupid part of me still believes it was real. His expression softened and an unsteady, goofy grin took over his face. His ass clenched and released, his insides caressing me, collecting all the parts of me, bunching them up and wringing every ounce of pleasure out of me.

I know I said Romeo couldn't dance, and any other time that was true and probably still is. But put my dick inside him and let him ride it, and sweet Jesus, that boy could move. I'd never seen beauty like it and I'd never felt anything like it either. Not before him, and not after him either. It was bliss. Pure, unadulterated, otherworldly bliss.

I've never heard sounds like the sounds we made together either. Raw, guttural groans that bounced off the walls. I thrashed beneath him, hips thrusting and arching with no conscious thought from me. I clawed at the floor, desperate for something to anchor my sanity on. I found nothing, so I gave up. I relented. I surrendered. I gave myself over to him. My hands found him and started stroking. His thick, veiny cock pulsed in time with my thrusts. The noises we made amped up and grew louder and louder until what was happening sounded violent.

That day, something fragile and brittle that had been holding us apart shattered. It broke into so many pieces there was no way to put it back together. From that day, I was a match and he was a flame. We set each other alight and burned the world around us to ash. We fucked unbridled. Every day. Every night. All the time. If we were alone, I was inside him. Or getting him ready to take me. Or taking him into my mouth. Or feeding him my dick. Or eating his ass.

When he was sore from our efforts, he'd lie on his side on the sofa in our basement and I'd stretch out behind him as close as I could get. We'd both have hardly anything left to give, but he'd cross his legs tightly, I'd lube my dick, and I'd fuck the silky skin of his inner thighs. Sometimes, when we were both running on empty, he'd lie on his belly on my bed, naked, and I'd kneel behind him, pressing his cheeks together and using the crack of his ass for relief. He'd groan and smile and let me.

It was amazing. Majestic. Our libidos were raging, and they fed off each other.

It was the summer I thought would never end.

I was wrong.

All summers end.



Two days before I headed back to college, Romeo and I were messing around in my room. He was on his knees with his hand in his pants and my dick in his mouth. We didn't hear the car, but we heard the garage door. The motor whined, grinding old levers in a way that sent tremors through the whole house.

Romeo leaped to his feet, face white and stricken as he swiped at his mouth with the back of one hand. He moved away from me so fast that his back connected solidly with my closet door. I opened my mouth to speak, to reassure him, to tell him everything was okay, but he raised his finger to his lips furiously, silencing me as his eyes flashed in panic.

We straightened our clothes and hair without saying a word and after opening the bedroom door and calling a hasty greeting to my mom, I

whispered, “Chill. It’s fine. It’s not like it would be the worst thing in the world if she found out.”

And he laughed.

He actually laughed out loud. His face scrunched up, and his eyes looked watery. “Yeah, right,” he spluttered. “Not the worst thing.”

At the time, I was shocked but heavily numbed by the heat of his presence. It wasn’t until I was back at college that I started playing what had happened over and over in my mind on repeat. It ate at me. It burrowed into my heart and hurt me. It tore me to shreds. It found soft, sensitive parts of me, parts I’d hidden and never shown to anyone, and hurt me there too.

How could the best thing that had ever happened to me be the very thing Romeo was most ashamed of?

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“HERE’S TO MY LOVE”

Now

BY SOME MIRACLE, I slept well last night. I’ve woken feeling the most human I have since I got to Alabaster. Selby is brewing coffee by the time I get to the kitchen, and Romeo is back at his post at his desk.

“Shall I make eggs again?” I offer.

“Ooh, yes, please,” she says. “Poached would be great.”

“How ’bout you, Romeo? How’d you want yours?”

“Oh, he doesn’t mind. He’ll just have poached as well.”

Something about the dismissive way she makes the decision for him inflames me. It’s a hot, ancient fury that takes command of my body. It makes me brace and stand firm. I don’t move or speak until Romeo realizes I’m waiting to hear from him.

“I’d like scrambled,” he replies at last.

“Sure,” I say lightly.

Selby opens and closes her mouth in shock or annoyance. I can’t tell which. That enrages me too. The urge to protect Romeo has raised its head. It’s an urge that’s largely lain dormant for years, but now it’s been roused, it’s wide awake. The kind of awake that can’t be undone.

Romeo senses what’s happened. He must because before I turn to the stove to get cooking, he calls Tiger over to him and scratches him between the ears. He leans down and puts his head close to his dog as if he’s speaking to him, but his eyes don’t leave mine.

“Easy, Tiger,” he murmurs.

There's something inexplicably sweet about it. Something so sweet I'm suddenly overcome by the strangest realization. An understanding. A slow recognition. It's something I never knew and never even suspected, but perhaps it's been true the whole time—as much as I always looked out for Romeo and considered it my sworn duty to protect him, he did the same for me.

He smiles when it dawns on me. Not a smile exactly, just a quirk. Just a sideways twist of his mouth that carves two or three gentle lines into his cheek.

And like that, sweet turns into something my stupid heart reads as seductive.

Though I'm shaken, the rest of the morning passes without incident. Romeo works on whatever he's writing—sorry, I mean *making notes* on—and Selby reorganizes the pantry shelves at a speed that leaves a cloud of dust in her wake. I head into town at eleven and pick up a few groceries. They're both busy, so I figure I'll make lunch for all of us. I go back and forth a little on what to make because we'll have a big meal at the barbeque at Ollie's tonight. I settle on sandwiches. Fresh sourdough with roast chicken, green onion, mayo, and fine slices of Granny Smith apple.

I find the lap trays under the kitchen counter exactly where Sally kept them and line up a collection of her tiny bowls around each plate. I fill them with salted cashews, roughly chopped parmesan cheese, and sun-ripened figs.

When I hand Romeo his tray, he takes it and pauses, looking down for so long, I know he's traveling, and not only that, I know where he's gone. To a different time. A simpler time. A time when nothing big or bad had happened yet.

"You boys go ahead without me," says Selby. "I want to finish this section before I take a break."

Romeo and I take our trays out back and sit cross-legged in the dappled shade of the peppercorn tree at the end of the garden.

"D'you remember the first time your mom made the good sandwiches for us? You know, after my mom died?" Romeo asks. The fact he's initiating conversation and the subject matter surprises me in equal measure.

I smile and swallow the sudden lump that's formed in my throat. "I remember."

Romeo was at our house. Everything was still strange and confusing without Sal. The shock of what had happened still rang in my ears, shrill like tinnitus.

We were standing around in the kitchen, waiting for my mom to make us something to eat. Romeo and I were talking to each other about this and that. My mom was taking a lot longer than usual to fix the snack. When we looked over to see what was taking her so long, we saw she was making good sandwiches like Sal always made. She had a ton of ingredients laid out on the counter—smoked meat, seed bread, and ciabatta, and three or four kinds of cheese. She was looking down as she worked, tears streaming down her face. The second I saw them, I burst into tears. I didn't mean to. I'd been trying so hard to be strong for Romeo, but seeing my mom crying as she assembled one of Sal's good sandwiches was too much for me. Romeo stood beside me, close so I could put my arm around him, and he started crying too.

None of us said a word as we ate.

"Remember what I said when we finished eating?" Romeo asks, trying not to smile.

I do. I remember it like it was yesterday. When we were done and had scraped our plates and put them in the dishwasher, Romeo said, "Thanks, Carol. That was great. I think the tears added a really interesting flavor."

I smile, and this time, I swallow easily. Romeo nudges my side and starts laughing like he did then. Soft, helpless ripples of laughter bubble out of him in a steady stream that quickly starts overflowing. I laugh too. It's so fucking ridiculous, but I can't help it. It's always killed me that he said that.

"You ate my mom's tears and thanked her for them," I wheeze.

He laughs so much that he starts coughing.

"D'you remember the time your mom hadn't been shopping, so she got creative with toppings?" he says. I squint, trying to pull up the memory, but I come up empty. "She made a sandwich with peanut butter, tomato, cheddar cheese, mayo, and dill. It was horrific."

"What? Are you sure? I don't remember that at all."

"Oh yeah, that's right," he says softly. "You wouldn't. I ate your sandwich for you so you wouldn't have to."

For the rest of the afternoon, I lie on the sofa reading while Romeo writes. There's something so intensely right about being in his presence that I find myself mentally rehearsing long conversations with Lexi.

Hear me out, Lex, here's what I'm thinking—I give up my apartment in New York and move back to Alabaster. I can do a ton of what I do at work remotely. I'd probably only have to fly out once or twice a month and then I could stay with you for a couple of nights, or in a hotel, or something. I could rent our house from Mom and Dad. It would actually be perfect if you think about it. I could pay what they earn from renting it out through Airbnb, which would still be less than what I currently pay for my place. Plus, I'd take much better care of the house than Airbnb guests. You know I would. I'd do maintenance, and we could finally get the basement sorted out. It's a win-win situation.

Personally, I like this plan a lot. I have a feeling Lexi won't be a fan though. I think she'll probably poke holes in it, but I like it, and I'm getting more and more committed to it the more I think about it. Maybe I won't tell her about it after all. Maybe I'll just move back here and tell her after I've done it.

Being back in Alabaster has reminded me of something I lost sight of during the years of tears. Yes, I love Romeo more than reason. That's true. I'm *in love* with him, and I'll never love anyone the way I love him. That's not going to change. I've tried to change it. I spent five years trying, and I've had a ton of counseling. I've tried hating him, not thinking about him, and dating other people. I can conclusively say I don't love him less when I don't see him. Not even a little bit.

So, really, when you think about it, it doesn't make any difference if I'm here or on the other side of the world, does it?

But here's the thing I lost sight of while I was away. I love Romeo as a friend too. He's my best friend, and I miss him as a friend so much my entire body aches and I'm tired all the time. Maybe I forgot that from the shock and pain of everything that happened between us, but now that I'm back and near him again, I remember. Now that I see him like this, with a soft smile and daydreams written all over his face, I remember what it was like to have a friend like him. A friend who makes me laugh like no one else does at things that aren't funny when you explain them to other people. A friend who makes me feel like I know who and where I am simply because of my proximity to him. A friend who would happily eat a revolting sandwich so I don't have to.

I need that in my life.

I need it and I want it.

I think I can learn to live with the fact he's married. I mean, when you think about it, him being married won't hurt more if I live here than it does when I live in New York, and I'm used to that pain. I'm super experienced in dealing with it. I can survive it.

What I can't survive is a life without Romeo in it.

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“DO NOT SWEAR BY THE MOON, FOR SHE CHANGES”

THEN

I'D BEEN BACK AT college for two weeks, and instead of fading, the memory of Romeo's face when he thought my mom had caught us grew louder. More intrusive. More upsetting. I felt like a wild animal that was caged. I paced my room, and when that wasn't enough, I took to walking the streets late at night. There was an LGBTQ+ center on campus, and most nights, that's where I walked. I didn't go in. I just stood in the shadows and looked at the door, but that's where I ended up night after night.

At the end of my second year I'd applied for an exchange program on a whim. I had no expectation of actually getting it, and I didn't, but in the third week of my third year, I got a call from the head of my department saying the person who'd been successful was no longer able to take the placement and that if I wanted it, it was mine.

I said yes on the spot, and a week later, I'd given up my room in the dorm and was on a plane to England. Destination: Cambridge. I was as shocked by my impulsiveness as I was by the person I became while I was there. Not became, that's the wrong way of putting it. I was shocked by the fact I allowed myself to be who I really was. The first Friday night in Cambridge, a group of people in my class invited me to a pub just off campus. We were having a chill time, drinking pints and cracking jokes. I was scrambling to keep up with the witty British banter when someone asked me if I had a girlfriend back home. I didn't skip a beat. I said, “No. I have a boyfriend.”

I held my head high as I said it and took in each of the faces around me as I spoke. Reactions ranged from mild ambivalence to total acceptance. It was

like I'd disclosed nothing more important than my favorite color.

There was a freedom in having said it that made me realize there was part of my lungs I hadn't used before. A small pocket that had never been filled with air before. There, in a tiny, timber-clad pub with freakishly low ceilings, on a rainy as fuck night in a country that wasn't mine, I finally felt like I could breathe.

After the initial exhilarated shock of finding myself in a foreign country, reality set in. I felt the miles between Romeo and me. There were three thousand seven hundred and forty-four of them, and I felt every one. I felt them all in a way that was so real and visceral that it upset my balance. I felt off-kilter like I was leaning a little more to the left than I should have been.

The time difference was a bitch. At first, it was almost the same as it always was. Romeo would call and our conversations would be profound or completely random.

"Tiger, wait," he said just as I was about to hang up a call that had been totally news-based. "Don't go. I realized this morning I don't know what your least favorite emotion is."

I mean honestly, what kind of question is that? Only Romeo would think to ask something like that, especially out of the blue. "Ummm..." I hummed as I mulled it over. "Guilt, I guess."

"Ah, guilt's a good one. D'you know my mom always used to say that when it comes to guilt, a little goes a long way? I never really understood what she meant. She said I'd get it when I was older, but so far, no dice."

I chuckled and asked, "What's yours?" forgetting for a second that I didn't need to. I knew what it was.

"Grief," he said simply.

As weeks passed, Romeo and I talked less frequently. At first, it was a day here or there that was missed, and we'd make up for it by catching up in a long call the next time we spoke. It was awful. I'd wake up in the morning, head full of things to tell him, and have to wait all day for him to wake up. Then he'd be in class when it was still early enough for me to call. I counted his missed calls and kept a tally of them in my head. The more there were, the happier I was. I saw it as proof. Of what, I couldn't really say, but I liked it. I liked thinking of him at home in his room, sitting on his bed with his phone in his hands and my name on the screen. I liked that it

meant he was thinking of me. Pining for me. Maybe not in the same way I pined for him, but it was something.

Maybe it was wrong of me to like it, but I did.

Initially, Romeo and I had lofty plans of him coming over for Thanksgiving break, but it didn't pan out because no one celebrates Thanksgiving in the UK, so I didn't get time off or anything like that. I was bleak about it, but Lex and my parents came out to spend Christmas with me, and that was great. We spent Christmas and Boxing Day in a charming rented stone cottage in Dorset and spent the better part of the next week driving around Wales. It was a blast. Lexi and I did most of the driving, and our parents sat in the back seat of the tiny Ford Fiesta we'd rented and behaved like kids, constantly whining, "Are we there yet?" and laughing uproariously at their dumb joke.

After the trip, I flew straight into Columbus for the start of the second semester. When I'd packed up my room in Cambridge, I was surprised to find myself feeling a stomach-dropping sense of defeat, sure that as I folded my clothes and bundled them into my bag, I was all but folding myself up and cramming myself back into the closet.

That's not how it turned out. When I got back, I rented a room in a shared apartment five minutes from campus. One of my new roommates, Benji, was gay, and he took one look at me and clocked me immediately. He was discreet about it, and instead of minding that he knew, I found I loved having someone to talk to about my sexuality. Benji was one of those guys who was out and proud and supremely vocal about it. He had bleach-blond hair he wore in an elaborately styled coiffe and wasn't one to shy away from glittery eyeliner. He was a breath of fresh air, and we quickly became friends. He introduced me to people and places, and soon, I wasn't on the periphery of the queer scene looking in anymore. I was out—in Ohio, at least.

"Now say it with me, Benj... People in Alabaster don't know Jude is gay," I coached as we waited for the plane to take off at the start of Spring Break. Benji's parents were assholes with a limited amount of appreciation for his fabulousness, so I'd invited him to come home with me for the vacation.

He nodded earnestly and said, "People in Alabaster have their heads up their asses 'cause they can't tell Jude's queer as Christmas."

I pinched the bridge of my nose and sighed loudly. “Close but not quite. Try again.”

He nudged my shoulder and gave me a sincere smile. “It’s okay. I’ve got you, Judels.”

“For God’s sake, don’t call me Judels!” I screeched, laughing and punching his shoulder playfully. “You may as well tattoo a Pride flag on my forehead!”

I needn’t have worried. Benji was good people, and he had my back. He was a lot, but he didn’t let anything slip. My mom and dad loved him, and before the break was over, Ollie and Dan were making plans for him to return to Alabaster over the summer, with or without me. Despite all that, I regretted bringing him home with me. The whole vacation ended up being a complete shit show.

Romeo was weird pretty much from the second I arrived. He was at the airport with my parents when I landed, smiling broadly and holding up a foil balloon with a cartoon tiger on it, but he tensed when I hugged him. I thought I’d imagined it, so I hung on for dear life, blinking back tears of relief as I inhaled him. He smelled like rain after a drought. Like old oak trees and mystical places. Like the love of my life. Six months of not seeing him was too long. Not talking to him every day was awful. I hated it and couldn’t wait to get back to the way things were the previous summer.

Getting to know Benji and other queer people had given me better insight into shame, fear, and internalized homophobia. I couldn’t say his reaction last summer didn’t still hurt, but I understood it better. I was trying to, at least.

His body stiffened as I held him, and not in a good way. His abs clenched and he stepped back as soon as I loosened my grip on him. His face was different. Eyes focused in a new and strange way, hoods lidded, brows drawn down low.

“I don’t think Romeo likes me,” said Benji after a few days in Alabaster.

I denied it vehemently, but honestly, I suspected he was right. Romeo had never been a fan of loud people, and Benji was about as loud as you could get without carrying a loudspeaker around and using it every time you opened your mouth. I could tell he got on Romeo’s nerves, and as a result, I spent most of the vacation cracking jokes and trying to keep the conversation light.

Every night, I left my window wide open and stayed awake until the early hours, waiting for the soft thud on the garage roof that signaled Romeo was close. It never came.

By the last night, I was in such a bad way that I snuck out and climbed up his drainpipe and onto the balcony outside his bedroom window. I tapped at the glass for ages before he woke up, too scared to tap loudly in case I woke Mike.

“What are you doing here?” he mumbled through a haze of deep sleep. One cheek was creased and his hair was all over the place. He was so beautiful a tiny moan slipped out of me as I leaned in to kiss him.

It wasn’t like any of the other kisses we’d shared. He didn’t close his eyes and smile. He didn’t even quirk one side of his mouth. He didn’t lean in to meet me either. He jerked his head back and put a hand on my chest to push me away. I felt the outline of his handprint on my chest for hours. Days. Months.

“I love you, Jude,” he said.

I was confused, but my heart thundered with joy. “I love you too. I love you so—”

“You’re the most important person in my life, you know that. Your friendship means more to me than anything. I don’t want to fuck it up, so I think maybe we should stop the other stuff before something happens that we can’t come back from.”

His words hit me in waves. Hard, tidal waves that rolled me, dunked me, and spat me out. I was reeling. The quick stab of rejection was so deep and brutal that it left me winded and unable to say another word, let alone ask any of the avalanche of questions that came to mind. The threads of scar tissue that covered my heart tore open, contracting and ripping more with every second I stayed on the balcony with him.

I limped home through the park, walking a familiar path that was suddenly foreign to me. The shadows of the swings and trees were long and menacing, stretching out, reaching for me, and winding around my ankles like gnarled webs and tendrils. They snaked up my limbs, slowing me until every step was painful. Overhead, oak leaves rustled, laughing at me, and Inferno, who I’d always thought of as a friend, hissed and breathed fire in my direction. In my chest, my heart throbbed, weeping and using the last of its strength to beat the only name it has ever known.

Romeo

Romeo

Romeo

I didn't tell Benji about Romeo because, you know, oaths and promises, *and you'll never tell anyone* and all that. Even though it was unsaid, he knew what was up. He took one look at my face the next day, put his arm around me, and said, "Don't sweat it, Judels, we've all been there. We're all a little in love with our childhood best friends, but straight guys are all the same—they don't stop being straight no matter how much we blow them."

Once I was back at college, Romeo acted like nothing had happened. He called me just as much as ever. More, maybe. Maybe it was my imagination, but to me, his calls and messages were tinged with desperation. He'd hurt me more than I could have imagined anyone could hurt me, and he seemed to be doing his best to act like it had never happened. It gave me whiplash. The rejection was fresh in my mind, a deep open wound that showed no signs of healing. I'd lie awake at night, tossing and turning, planning long conversations with Romeo, asking him the reams of questions that swirled around in my mind, pushing out reason, demanding answers. Demanding, above all things, that he tell me what I'd done wrong.

I'd wake in the morning, clammy and overwrought, and in the bright light of day, I'd shake my head at my own idiocy. By the time I showered, dressed, and opened my curtains, it was obvious. It was clear what was wrong. It was simple.

I was a man, and he wanted a woman.

I wrapped my pride around me, tighter and tighter every day, and resolved to never, ever show Romeo how much he'd hurt me. I answered when he called and messaged him back without leaving him on read any more than I could help it. I sent him photographs of open windows and listened for hours when Mike met Mary and Romeo struggled to find it in himself to like her. I threw myself into my studies during the day, and at night, I went out and got absolutely blasted. Most nights, Benji would come out with me and walk me home as I stumbled alongside him. He'd pull off my shoes and undo my belt before I fell into bed, and every once in a while, he'd say, "You know, babe, I could make you feel better."

I'd laugh him off and pretend I didn't know what he meant. The last time it happened, he reached for my junk as he said it. I slapped his hand away and sat up, wading through the sickly fog of booze just enough for his face

to come into focus. Benji was good-looking. Electric blue eyes and platinum-blond hair. Pretty and handsome at the same time.

He did less than nothing for me.

“Don’t you want to know what it’s like to be with someone who doesn’t regret it the next day? Because I promise you, Judels, I won’t regret it.”

“Romeo,” I slurred. “I only want Romeo.”

For the first time in my life, I didn’t look forward to summer. I dreaded it, and I was right to dread it. It was awful. I was home, but nothing felt good. Romeo was there with his big fake smile and that weird look in his eyes. He said all the same things he usually did, but they sounded completely different. I’d never imagined a world in which I could feel uncomfortable around him, but it turned out that world existed. We hung out with Dan and Ollie more than usual, and Romeo tagged along but didn’t really talk or contribute to the conversation.

It drove me insane.

By midsummer, I’d passed through the worst of the shock of his rejection and found myself wading knee deep in simmering anger. That’s what happens to pain that goes untreated. It morphs. Transforms. It changes into something stronger and uglier.

It was the weekend of the Cherry Festival. It was always a big deal in Alabaster, and something Romeo and I had found deeply cringe as teens. As we got older, it had started to seem, well, not cool by any means, but not like a complete waste of time.

It was a clear day, blue sky and sunny with only a smattering of clouds, just enough to keep it from being uncomfortably hot. The town center had been decorated with red, pink, and green home-sewn bunting, and stands were set up everywhere, selling every conceivable product that could be made from cherries.

Romeo and I were standing with Ollie and Dan, drinking cherry juice we’d laced with vodka, when she walked by. Ollie’s head spun. It actually spun, swiveling around so hard it looked like his head was about to detach from his shoulders.

She wore a white sundress with cherries embroidered all over it. The deep-red thread caught the light and made the white fabric seem whiter than white. Her hair was shoulder-length, dark, and so glossy it almost didn’t look natural. Her face was neat and sweet. She had big brown eyes that were far from sweet.

“Holy shit,” said Ollie. “Who’s that?”

“Oh, her? That’s Selby Rhoden. She just started at Brooker and Bradfield.” Dan made it his business to know as much as possible about every woman between eighteen and forty who set foot in Alabaster. “You got no chance, bruh. She’s a lawyer and like twenty-seven or twenty-eight. She’s way out of your league.”

Dan and Ollie were still looking at her, eyes big and vacant. Romeo was too. I saw him. He wasn’t craning his neck or anything, but he was following her as she moved through the crowd. He clenched his jaw slightly and quickly relaxed it, breaking into a big, dazzling false smile when he caught me looking at him.

Suddenly, my anger wasn’t knee deep. It was chest deep, neck deep, nose deep, and climbing. It was thick and hot. Rancid. Poison that twisted my guts and put words in my mouth.

“An older woman, huh?” I sneered. “Sounds perfect for you, Romeo. You should get her number. She might be just what you need to work out your mommy issues.”

I regretted it as soon as I said it. Ollie and Dan tittered uncomfortably, unsure where to look or if they should laugh. As a group, we were prone to bursts of sarcasm and cutting humor. Most friend groups are. It’s normal. In our case, it wasn’t a big deal. It was always meant as a joke and was usually taken as one. It was just that I’d never made a joke like that aimed at Romeo before, and I’d never let anyone else make one in my presence either.

Romeo’s mouth scooted to the side but no lines formed on his cheek. Not even shallow ones. His eyes were like mirrored glass. Jagged and hard. He raised his glass to his lips and took two slow sips.

“Hold my drink,” he said, holding it out to me.

In my dreams, I call him back.

In my dreams, I chase after him, fall to my knees, apologize, and beg for his forgiveness.

In reality, I watched, immobile, blood running cold as he sauntered through the crowd, long, loping strides growing fluid as his arms and hips moved together and he closed in on Selby.

“A PAIR OF STAR-CROSSED LOVERS”

Now

SELBY DUMPS A STORE-BOUGHT potato salad into a large blue-and-white bowl and hurries us out the door. “Come on, come on, we’re going to be late,” she cries.

We get to Ollie’s, and I’m immediately enveloped in a cacophony of arms and chests and fist bumps and cheek kisses. Ollie and Dan have visited me separately in New York, and the three of us met up in Vegas for a long weekend a couple of years ago. I haven’t seen either of the Olivias for years, though, and this is the first time I’ve met Dan’s girlfriend, Leigh.

“How awesome is she?” Dan says out of the corner of his mouth immediately after introducing me. “Seriously, how awesome?”

I nod and do things with my eyebrows to suggest that the woman I’ve known for all of two seconds is indeed awesomeness personified.

“Not being funny,” he says as he hands me an icy beer and leads me out to the backyard, “but I think she’s the one. I can’t feel my face when I’m with her. Or my hands. Or my legs. It’s scary as shit, but I like it.”

I laugh and throw my arm around his neck. Fuck, it’s good to see him. Especially like this. Impersonating a grownup, living in a place that only looks a little like a frat house, and so in love he can’t feel his face.

The evening quickly devolves into a blur of hilarity. Booze flows freely and so do anecdotes from the past. It’s a trip down memory lane in a good way for once, and I must admit, I’m having a great time. Being here, seeing these people and catching up, reminds me why I loved living here. These people aren’t just friends. They’re family.

“Remember that time you got sent out of class for calling Mr. Wallace an asshole?” Dan laughs.

“I didn’t call him an asshole. I called him an ass, and I was right. I stand by my assessment of him. You can’t whitewash history and get mad when someone calls you out on it,” I reply.

Romeo nods and his mouth curls up at the side. I know he’s remembering what happened that day—I packed up my things after I got sent out of class and he packed his too. Mr. Wallace lost it.

“Why are you packing your things, Romeo?” he yelled. “You haven’t done anything.”

“I may not have done anything,” Romeo said, taking care to speak politely like he always did when addressing an authority figure, “but that doesn’t mean I didn’t think it, and if you don’t want people who think you’re an ass in this class, then you definitely don’t want me here.”

The entire class erupted in screeches of laughter. Mr. Wallace floundered and made a fatal mistake. “Look,” he said above the din, “if you don’t like the way I teach, you can see yourself out. I don’t mind. This is a class for people who *want* to be here.”

I guess he didn’t think the entire class would take him up on his offer.

“Remember his face when he finally caved and came out to the quad and told us to get back to class?” Dan laughs. “It was priceless.”

“Talk about having your tail tucked between your legs,” says Ollie, showing his teeth and the white around his eyes as he mimics the look of fury on Mr. Wallace’s face that day.

We all laugh, and Ollie pours us a round of tequila. The shot goes down like a homesick mole and so does the next one. My thoughts slow and compress and my arms and legs start feeling overly bendy. Things that were funny are flat-out hilarious now. Even things that aren’t funny at all are funny as hell. Everyone’s loud and talking over each other. After a good long while, Ollie remembers he’s the host. “Shit,” he mutters to himself, “if I don’t get barbequing, who the hell will?”

He and Dan battle it out with lighters and briquettes and, by some miracle, manage to produce a pretty decent offering of steaks. Ollie’s outdoor table is small, with only four seats, so we offer them to the women and sit side by side on the porch step as we eat.

I’m happy and present and oddly removed at the same time. Now that there’s been a lull in the conversation brought on by chewing, it strikes me

that Romeo has been here for years, and I haven't.

I watch the three of them interact and feel distant, aware that I'm not from here anymore. Romeo isn't on the periphery of the group like he was as a teen. He's in. He belongs here. He's a local. I'm the tourist. I watch Romeo with them and feel all the things: pride that he's finally comfortable enough with himself to be comfortable with other people, and pathetically, regret and a deep sense of loss that I'm not the only one who knows him anymore.

When the meal is over, we mingle and talk over each other. Selby and Leigh start calling out songs they want to hear and Ollie plays them. Some truly terrible dancing ensues, and when I look around, I notice Romeo is absent. I don't go looking for him exactly. Not consciously anyway. I extract myself from the group and wander through the house, and when I don't find him inside, I do a lap of the garden. I find him tucked away to one side of the shed.

"Are you hiding?" I ask, though I don't need to. I know he is. He has a limit to how much peopling he can handle in one sitting.

He gives me one of those classic Romeo shrugs. One shoulder raises and twists forward, his chin dips down, and shadows dance across his face, hollowing out his cheekbones and reminding me he's the night, the moon, and the stars.

I sit on the low wall of the flower bed planted alongside the shed and watch him, jaw hanging loosely. It's dark. The patio and house are lit up. Soft gold light splinters and fans out behind him like a halo when I blink slowly.

A halo for an unlikely hero.

"Rewrite the Stars" by Zac Efron and Zendaya starts to play. One of the Olivias squeals and yells, "Whooo! I fucking love this song."

The music travels from the house to where we are. The melody rides a gentle wave toward us and the piano sets a commanding beat that rips up the grass and enters me through the soles of my feet. It reaches into me and holds me steady, then it makes me sway. A smooth tenor sings about want, fate, and two hearts being kept apart by forces out of their control. The song tells a story of a love that's impossible. Odds that can't be beaten. A tragedy that's been written into the sky. Into the stars. I feel it so deeply I can't talk. Romeo feels it too. He probably feels it differently from me, but he feels it.

He must because his eyes slide shut and stay closed a little longer each time he blinks.

I don't blink at all. Not once. Not one single time. I look at him and at the rest of the people here tonight. I feel the same sense of incredulity I always do when I'm around Romeo and other people.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" A gentle husk in his throat spins and floats over to where I am. It finds me and burrows into my chest.

I open my mouth and shut it again. I'm having huge problems with cognitive function, and I'm aware of it. A believable lie seems out of range, so I go with the truth.

"Oh, just wondering." I smile, slurring slightly. "You know, just always wondering how the hell they all do it." I laugh a little laugh that has an unhinged twist at the end and wave unsteadily toward the house and the people standing there. The gesture is a little too broad and my hand flops limply onto my lap when it's done. *Shit. Shit, shit. I'm drunk.*

I'm drunker than I thought I was and definitely way drunker than I should ever be anywhere near Romeo.

"Do what?" he asks.

I giggle in mild, brain-numbed panic. The shards of light behind Romeo spray out and start to spin. *Fuck. There goes my filter.* I feel it slipping, but I'm powerless to do anything about it because he's moving toward me, dislodging and discarding the very last scraps of whatever it is that keeps me from speaking my mind when I'm with him. He sits next to me on the wall. Close, but not touching. "I never...I've never understood how they do it. You know, how everyone else acts normal around you, like...like, you're not the most beautiful thing they've ever seen."

My words land and I hear them. The base stupidity of them makes me feel winded. I breathe in and out slowly, centering myself, preparing myself for the pale, blistering gaze I know I deserve. A gaze that will fry my skin and leave me scarred and stark naked.

It doesn't come.

Instead, when he finally looks at me, his eyes are damp, wet in the corners, and his gaze ripples rather than burns. I sink into it. Melting as I surrender. My bones are lava. Molasses. There's no fight left in me.

He looks at me for the longest time. Minutes. Hours. A lifetime. And then his hand moves. Mine is on the stone wall we're both sitting on. My palm is flat, fingers spread out on the cool, rough surface. Holding on like a man

desperately clinging to his last shards of sanity. He moves his hand closer in increments so gradual I feel myself evolving as he does it. The side of his hand touches mine. It's a brand. A hot, sizzling brand. His pinky climbs over mine, curling around it and tightening. Strangling me, stealing my air as sure as if he were holding his hand over my mouth and nose.

"What happened to us, Romeo?" The words fizzle out of my mouth in a frantic gasp, followed by the panicked exhale of a man who's been held underwater for so long that he didn't think he'd survive it. "Why did you do it? *Why?* We were good. Why did you break us?"

The muscle in his jaw bunches. The finger he has wound around mine tenses and releases.

He unleashes a long, pained sigh. One that skips over the paved garden path and takes off, flitting into the air and telling the night sky all about what a dumb fuck I am.

"You have a funny way of remembering things, Jude."

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“GIVE ME MY ROMEO”

Now

WE'RE BACK HOME, AND Selby's even drunker than I am. She's bouncing around topics, starting and stopping, talking loudly enough to strip paint off the walls. "I'm telling you, Rome, if they don't get that print delivered by Monday, they're going to regret it. I'll go down there to speak to the manager. Don't think I won't." *Rome? Rome?* My blood boils. *He's not a fucking Italian city! He's a lover. The world's best, most passionate lover.* I turn to correct her, but fortunately, she's moved on to the next topic already. "Did you give it to him?"

"Give him what?" asks a tired-sounding Romeo.

"His birthday present, dumb-dumb." She laughs and slaps her thigh but misses, momentarily upsetting her balance. She corrects with some effort. "You took so long to find it, and now that he's here, you've forgotten to give it to him. I swear, you'd forget..." She looks around the room, mentally ticking off things Romeo has forgotten or misplaced in the past, laughing so hard she hiccups. "Holy shit, I can't see a single thing in this room you haven't already lost or forgotten."

Romeo smiles thinly and says, "It's late. I'll give it to him tomorrow."

"Noooo," wails Selby. "Now! Give it to him now!"

I'm watching them, my head flicking back and forth between them, and the room spins slightly each time I do it. I can't tell exactly what I'm feeling about the fact that Romeo seems to have bought me a birthday present without knowing he would be seeing me, but I'm definitely feeling something.

“Now!” Selby says again, this time landing a hard, tacky slap on Romeo’s ass to spur him on. She turns to me conspiratorially. “It’s terrible, Jude. Tell him you hate it so he knows I was right. ’Kay? Will you do that for me?”

Romeo returns, his mouth a hard line, and presses a gift into my hands. The paper is thin and crumpled and there’s a rip in it where a card has been torn off. I open it before I’m sure of where I’ve landed on telling him I hate it or not. I can’t quite decide who I want to upset more right now, Selby or Romeo. The paper tears easily, exposing soft, buttery fabric and a loud, garish print. It’s pants. Pajama pants. Orange with a black stripe.

“Whoa,” I say as the biggest, dumbest grin of all time takes over my face. “Tiger pants. Neat!”

“Oh, Jude.” Selby shakes her head in a cocktail of sympathy and disgust. “They’re so ugly. Try them on. You’ll see. Go.” She waves me down the hall to the guest room and takes a purposeful step or two toward me with her arm swinging back. I take one look at her face and set off at a brisk trot before she has time to swat my behind as well. “Go, go, go!”

While I’m in my room changing, I make three frantic calls to Lexi. I’m shocked and outraged when she doesn’t answer, despite the fact it’s well past midnight and I know full well she has her phone on downtime between nine p.m. and seven a.m. She calls it balance and Adulthood 101. I send her several messages, the urgency cranking up with each one, and then check Romeo’s Instagram out of pure habit. Nothing has changed. He still hasn’t posted in years. Not since he posted the photograph of me and him sitting on the couch at my house, mouths stuffed full of popcorn, the summer I thought would never end. After that I scroll through my followers, trying yet again to work out which one of them is Romeo’s alternate account. Again, I can’t find one that stands out.

When it finally dawns on me that I’m keeping everyone waiting, I step out into the hall, shirtless and barefoot, the drawstring of my tiger pants still undone.

Romeo leans against the wall opposite my bedroom door. The house is darker than when I went into my room. Most of the lights downstairs have been turned off. Only the stair lights are still on.

“Where’s Selby? I thought she wanted to see me in the new pants.”

He shrugs and tilts his head toward the stairs without breaking eye contact. “Guess she got bored of waiting.”

“Oh.”

The mood has changed. It was light and loose when I went into my room, but now it's different. That's probably my imagination. It's probably more a product of me being a drunken idiot than anything else. I suddenly feel more stupid than usual, and self-conscious on top of it too. "W-what do you think?"

Romeo's gaze slides down my body like something hot and runny. Something I feel on my skin just as surely as if he were touching me.

Huh?

Hang on. Did that really just happen, or do I need to add hallucinations to my ever-growing list of mental health concerns?

Jesus. How drunk am I? Of course he didn't look at me like that. His wife, the woman he married, is waiting for him upstairs. In bed.

Romeo leans his head against the wall behind him and grazes his teeth over his bottom lip, leaving the soft, pink flesh glittering in the low light. "I think you should do up the drawstring before you find yourself with your pants around your ankles...that's what I think."

Wait. What?

It's not just me, right? That was sexually charged, wasn't it?

I look down, head spinning from the motion, and find he's right. The pants hang low on me, and the waistband is loose, clinging to my hips with less than a breath to spare. I watch my hands fumble with the ties, fingers thick and spongy, all signs of dexterity well and truly lacking. I take a step or two toward him, so distracted by the effort of tying a bow that I momentarily forget to fight the force that draws me to him.

I find myself a hairsbreadth away from him.

His hand floats up, long graceful fingers stretched out toward me. For a really mad second, I find myself thinking he's going to rake them through the trail of hair that leads from my naval to my cock. He used to do that. He did. I remember that. He liked it. I know he did. I'm fucking sure he did.

"A-are you trying to seduce me?" I whisper as if keeping my tone low somehow makes the question less embarrassing.

His eyes spark like moonlight hitting glass as they continue to roam my body. A wave of lust washes over me. Before I have time to brace, another one hits me. And another, and another. My words hang in the air, bobbing and dipping between us.

He speaks at last. "But, Jude," he says reasonably, "if I was trying to seduce you, wouldn't I be naked with your dick in my ass?"

My breath hitches, catching in my throat and strangling me so hard it leaves me spinning. It's not just that he said it. It's that he *said* it. That he acknowledged what we were, what we used to do to each other. What we used to be to each other. What I like, and what he likes too. He never used to talk about it. In all the time I've known him, he's never talked about it like this.

It makes me physically ache. For what we were. For what we could have been.

It makes me want to scream. It makes me want to open my lungs and roar for the ages. For the men and women like us. For the people who don't fit neatly into either of those distinctions. It makes me want to break time, to tear it open with my teeth and howl the same thing my heart has been weeping since that awful night five years ago. "*Give him back. Please, give him back to me.*"

"So, like, do you buy me something every year for my birthday, or what?" Not sure how I managed to string all that together, but I'm pretty pleased with the effort.

"Yep. Birthdays..." he says dreamily. "Christmas too."

"Oh." I nod as though that makes complete sense when, in fact, it makes less than none. "What do you do with them? The gifts, I mean."

"Box in the attic." He raises a shoulder as if that explains everything.

He leans back against the wall again, blinking slowly. This time, as he does it, his mouth twitches. His lips quirk, parting slightly up and to the right, giving me a tiny glimpse of a glossy canine. It's a small thing, the space between his lips. A little half-moon between a fleshy top and bottom lip.

My brain cuts out.

My dick sees an opening.

I lower my mouth onto his without any warning and press my tongue into that space, sweeping it across smooth enamel, licking and tasting him before I can stop myself. His eyes fly open in shock. Mine do too.

I mean to pull away. I do. I mean to pull away, apologize, and castigate myself wholeheartedly for the extent of the fuckery at hand. I can't, though, because he's wrapped a hand around the back of my neck like a vine, locking me tightly in place. He opens his mouth, moans into mine, and my soul starts to fray, coming loose at the edges. Romeo moans again. It's a

soft and husky sound, and it feels and tastes and sounds like one thing. One thing only.

More.

My jaw drops open.

We crash together and his tongue finds mine and takes it as if it's his. As if it's always been his. My body reacts instantly. Every cell is aflame. On fire. I'm a rampant inferno of want. Years of tears come to a head and erupt. Spilling out of me in a lust so thick and dense, he's forced to swallow it down, taking it from me and twisting it, turning it, changing it until it's something else altogether.

He kisses me hard, teeth scraping my lips and colliding with his. He tears at my skin, my arms, and my back, slamming his hips against mine, grinding our cocks together until I'm blind with desire.

Reality shrieks my name, hitting me like a splash of ice water to the face, and I push him back so hard I hear the hollow sound of air leaving his lungs as he hits the wall behind him. I step back, too, gasping for breath and hoping like hell the rush of oxygen will bring a strong dose of common sense.

"*Romeo!* What the fuck are you doing? You're married." He looks dulled, removed, struck dumb. He fingers his bruised bottom lip, stroking it and pushing it into his mouth, running his tongue slowly across it as if he's savoring the taste of my kiss. When he releases it, I say, "*You're married.*" This time, I say it for my own benefit more than his. It's a hiss. An accusation. A demand for an explanation.

"You're hard," he says as if that's an answer.

"Fuck you, asshole," I spit. "Hard? You think this is hard?" I drag the heel of my palm over my raging erection, expelling a rushed groan through my teeth from the storm of sensation it wakes. My anger dissipates, dissolving and scattering as he watches. "This isn't hard. I'm not hard. It's more than hard, Romeo. It's pain. *I'm in pain.*"

His eyes cloud and his Adam's apple rides up and down his throat as he swallows something that doesn't go down easily. Regret, I'd say if I still had any faith in my ability to read Romeo, but I don't, so I'm stunned when he whispers, "Let me help you."

"Don't," I warn, but instead of staying where I am, I find my body moving toward him again, dragged closer by a gravitational force I'm powerless to resist. "Don't you dare touch me."

He presses his lips together, stifling a whimper, and nods, taking hold of the tip of the tie of my pants while taking care not to touch my body, and pulls at it gently. I tied it tightly in my earlier stupor so it doesn't come undone without some convincing, but he doesn't give up. He works it, pulling carefully but hard, still not touching my skin, until, at last, the thing keeping us apart unravels.

For all he's done, for all the misery he's caused me, he has the decency to respect what I've asked of him. He doesn't touch me. He sinks to his knees at my feet, fully dressed but undone, looking up at me with stars in his eyes as he inches my pants over my hips slowly. I buck and writhe, blinking frantically in an attempt to wake up.

If this is a dream, I need to wake up.

Now.

I need to wake up now because it will kill me to wake up later and find that it didn't happen.

It's no dream, though, because when the throbbing heat of my cock is exposed, he inhales like he's been holding his breath, mouth open, eyes wild, and I feel the air he expels like a soft caress on my naked balls.

That doesn't happen in dreams. Believe me, I know. I've dreamed dreams like this more times than I can count. I know how they start and how they end. He holds his right hand out near his head, palm open in surrender, as if that's meant to set me at ease. The left drifts toward my cock, clenching into a fist that he digs his teeth into when it gets too close to me.

"Please, Jude," he whines against his knuckles. I can't tell if it's the sound he makes, or the way he looks up at me, or maybe it's the fact I wasn't lying. I am in pain. I'm so hard, there's a high, whirring sound in my ears and my heart is beating like it means to harm me. Either way, my hand clamps around my dick without a single thought in my head, and I jack it like a man possessed. Pleasure and pain engulf me. Visions of Romeo then and Romeo now taunt me. Laughing and lapping at me until I'm leaking. Long strokes, short strokes, then quick frenzied tugs that make my eyes roll back in my head. Romeo doesn't blink. He doesn't move other than to let both hands fall to his thighs and open his mouth, showing me the soft, pink wetness inside. I almost black out from the sight of Romeo. My Romeo. My lover, my enemy, my life, on his knees at my feet.

There's a pause in pleasure, a full second or more when everything falls silent, when all that's left is a quiet certainty. An unshakable inevitability. A

promise of gratification that can't be undone. It's already been written. There's a beat, and then my orgasm rips through the walls and the floor. Through me and through time.

Despite the force and brutality, I have time to decide, to weigh my options. Do I aim for the floor, or do I blast my seed all over Romeo's perfect face?

To my surprise, I go with neither.

Instead, I grab him by the hair and fuck hard and deep into his open mouth, unloading a lifetime of heartbreak and resentment, choking him on the pain that's defined my adult life.

He doesn't falter. He swallows everything I give him and, for good measure, wipes the last drops off his lips with his thumb, then raises it to his lips and licks what's there too.



And to think I thought I was a mess before last night. Comparatively, I had my shit together big time. Back then, I was just a heartbroken fool. Now, I'm a man who messaged his sister thirty-four times and the guy managing the renovation at our house nine times last night. Each message grew more desperate and more unhinged, urging him to grout the family bathroom upstairs and turn the water back on so I can move back into my house tomorrow or the next day. Added to that, I jerked off to Romeo on his knees so many times I still feel a little drunk this morning.

I am very hungover, though, so I don't think I am drunk-drunk, just cum-drunk, which, when you think about it, is way worse, given that I'm now also a cheater. An adulterer.

Wait. Am I the adulterer, or is Romeo?

Or is it one of those works-both-ways kinds of things?

Fuck. I don't know.

Maybe I should call Lexi and ask her? Seems like the kind of thing she'd know.

But no. Obviously not. No, I'm not going to call her. I can't. After the messages I sent her last night, I might have to drown my SIM card and

torch my phone. Might have to change my name legally and leave the country all together.

“Jude!” Selby calls brightly. She’s mixing pancake batter with fervor and her mood is that of a person impervious to hangovers. “Morning! How did you sleep?” Before I can answer, she gives Romeo a knowing smile and cocks a brow at my sleep shorts. “See, I told you he wouldn’t like the pants.”

The pants in question are currently covered in so much semen I’ve rolled them into a ball and shoved them into the bottom of my luggage because I’m not sure what else to do with them. I don’t think there’s a wash cycle in the US that can bring them back from what they’ve been through.

Romeo gives me a look. A smile with his eyes, not his lips. “Oh, he likes them just fine.”

My hand shakes so much as they bicker that coffee runs down the side of my mug. After breakfast, I offer to clean up. “And thanks again for having me,” I say to Selby, guilt stabbing at my side so hard my eyes water. “Really, it’s, uh, a lot, and I-I appreciate it.”

“Oh, it’s nothing.” She waves me off and looks in Romeo’s direction. “It’s been nice to see that one with a smile on his face for once.”

I keep my eyes firmly down to avoid looking at “that one” and say, “I’m going to get out of your hair today, you know, give you guys a little time to yourselves.”

My attempt not to look at Romeo has failed. He’s watching me with an intensity that could cut glass. His eyes are hooded and dark. Unreadable except to tell me I’m playing with fire.

“Yeah?” he says, taking care to keep his tone light. “What are you going to get up to?”

Asshole!

He knows damn well I don’t have plans.

“I, er, lake. The lake. I’m going to take a drive to Glen Lake. Haven’t been there in years. I’m going to get lunch out there and won’t be back until dinner.”

Selby’s lost interest in my dumb, spluttery ass, so she turns her attention to Romeo. “Hey, what do you say we take the gallery pics down in the bedroom and get the wall ready for the new print?”

“Sure,” Romeo says. “Why not.”

“I just hope they deliver it tomorrow. I’m going to lose my mind if they don’t. It’s been two and a half weeks since we got back from the honeymoon redo already. Almost three, actually. I mean, Jesus, I know it’s a small town and all that, but surely there has to be a smidge of customer service, you know? Just like a *little* attention to detail and effort.”

Romeo sighs, though I can tell he’s trying not to, and I hear my voice interject, clear as a bell. “Honeymoon redo? Why’d you have to have a redo? Didn’t you honeymoon in Hawaii?”

I know for a fact they did. Selby posted pics of beaches and palm trees with cliché romantic quotes on her social media the entire time she was there. Each post made me sicker than the last. At the time, I thought it would kill me.

Romeo’s face goes as hard as I’ve ever seen it. Selby’s comes to life.

“Well,” she says, widening her eyes in a way that lets me know she enjoys the hell out of telling this story. “We had *the* worst time on our first honeymoon.”

Huh? What now? Who has a bad time on their honeymoon?

“Seriously, it was a disaster. Can’t believe Rome didn’t tell you. Men. God, you really don’t tell each other anything. Anyway, where was I? Oh yeah, so it started before the wedding even ended. We were still at the venue and Romeo took a bit of a turn. You know when he goes all quiet and spacey?” I nod. “Well, it was like that, but he was white as a sheet. Now, to my mind, it was the shrimp. What else could it have been? The hotel has sworn black and blue it wasn’t. Excellent suppliers, top-notch chefs, perfect food preparation practices, you name it, they threw it at me when I complained, but *I know* it was that fucking shrimp. You know when you just know something?”

I nod again, or I think I do, at least. I’m not sure.

“We’d already paid for the hotel, and I figured, it’s *fiine*, he’ll rally, but when I tell you he didn’t...I mean, he didn’t *at all*. He barely left the chalet the entire time we were there. He couldn’t eat. He could barely lift his head off the pillow. We didn’t consummate the marriage until three weeks after we got home.”

She laughs riotously, and Romeo says, “Jesus Christ, Selby.”

A chill runs down my spine. I remember that night. The wedding. I remember it as if it happened yesterday. I remember it as if it’s still

happening now. As if part of me has lived there, in that parking lot, for half a decade.

I look at Romeo until he has no choice but to look back. When our eyes meet, his are haunted. There's a truth in them. A terrible, vast, boundless truth.

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“A SEA NOURISHED WITH LOVERS’ TEARS”

THEN

THE LAST WEEKS OF that summer, the one Selby moved to Alabaster, were filled with a very unique blend of emotion. Oh, there was anger. So much anger. Anger and despair. Anger, despair, and a heaping serving of defeat. Anger because fuck him. Fuck him forever for walking away from me and going to talk to her that day. Fuck him for getting her number, and mostly, fuck him for choosing that summer, of all summers, to get over his crippling shyness around hot women. Despair because I knew, in my bones, in my soul, we were good together, even if he didn’t realize it, even if he didn’t know what we were or what it meant. Defeat, endless and rolling, because what it really boiled down to was the simple fact that I’m a man and he wanted a woman.

Anger, despair, and defeat because God had a truly sick sense of humor for making me love Romeo the way I loved him when he didn’t love me back.

I’d been offered a scholarship to do my master’s at Cambridge. I’d been on the fence about it, but by the end of that summer and a fucking truckload of exposure to seeing Romeo and Selby’s stupid faces pressed together, talking complete bullshit and smiling like the biggest idiots on the planet, I couldn’t get far enough away from Alabaster.

Perhaps it was more a reflection of my mood at the time than reality, but it rained the whole time I was in Cambridge. The entire time. Morning, noon, and night. All I saw were gray skies and clouds weeping. Romeo still called a lot, and because I had a terrible sickness when it came to him, I still answered most of the time. When I didn’t, he’d call over and over, finally resorting to messaging the words that rendered me completely defenseless.

Is your window open?

Those words became a knife to my heart. A cold steel blade that twisted and killed me over and over. It didn't matter how broken I was. An oath was an oath, so when I saw them on my screen, my reply was the same.

Always

Sometimes, conversation between us flowed easily and things felt almost normal between us. On those nights, I felt better. Not quite happy, but not on death's door. When we were talking and laughing, he was my friend, not my lover, and I could almost forget he was the one who wielded the knife still lodged in my chest. Sometimes, conversation didn't flow well. It felt like we were fighting without drawing our swords, disagreeing about small things neither of us cared much about. Sometimes, most times, it was his fault. He'd become cagey and prickly. Quiet and hard to draw out.

Other times, it was my fault.

I guess I'm one of those people who likes picking at scabs. I can't help it. I just can't seem to allow a wound to grow closed without ripping nature's Band-Aid off a few hundred times.

"So, how's Selby?" I'd ask.

"Fine."

Fine? That wasn't enough. I needed more.

"Are you happy with her? Is she happy with you? Is it serious?"

Pick, pick, pick.

Rip, rip, rip.

"I don't know. She's great, and I guess it's serious. I guess it has to be. She's not like the other girls I've been with. It's different dating someone older, Jude. I can tell you that much. She knows what she wants, like, all the time. She's sure of herself. She says she's dating to marry, not fuck around."

Turns out, he was right. Selby did know what she wanted and she *was* dating to marry, and not only that, she was someone who knew how to get what she wanted.

I hated her more than I'd ever hated anyone. More than I thought I could hate anyone.

I remember them calling to tell me he'd proposed. It was a video call. Selby looked radiant and Romeo looked like a prop on a well-lit stage. I remember

the words and the sound of his voice. I remember that when he stopped talking, I said, "Cool."

I don't remember anything that happened for a full week after that.

Life took on a strange quality. It was an eerie dreamscape where things were tilted on their side, nothing made sense, and everything hurt all the time. A dark trance that had a distinct beginning and no end. The same snippets of conversations long past played over and over in my mind.

"You're the best person I know, Tiger."

"...the best person..."

"...best person..."

"Why the fuck are my feet so fucking big?"

"Is it me, or do they look like boats in these shoes?"

"I'll kiss you."

"You wouldn't."

"I will. I'll kiss you for sure."

"I was underwhelmed, to be honest."

"And you won't tell anyone?"

"...won't tell anyone..."

"...tell anyone..."

"Feels good. Don't stop."

"If I have a son, I'll name him Romeo."

Drinking to blackout was the only way I could escape them.

Sometimes it worked.

Sometimes it didn't.

It was that man, the one occupying that mind, who left Cambridge at the end of the year and flew home to attend his friend's wedding. The best man, they called me.

Time was the strangest it had ever been. A freight train with the wind behind it. It thundered toward me, and there wasn't a goddamn thing I could do to stop it. Selby was in a wedding planning frenzy, sending Romeo and me around left, right, and center, throwing her father's money around like it was nothing. Like it was confetti.

"Are you sure we need doves *and* butterflies?" Romeo asked.

"Babe." She smiled, but there was a clear warning in her eyes. "Of course I'm sure."

When the wedding talk reached a fever pitch, Romeo would zone out for a second. Not for long, just a quick dreamy wander to reset himself. Selby didn't get it at all.

“Romeo!” she’d say, clapping her hands together with a loud crack to jolt him out of it.

Have I mentioned that I hated her?

Because holy crap, did I ever.

I prayed for bad things to happen to her. Terrible things. When they didn’t, I prayed for them to happen to Romeo. When that didn’t work either, I prayed for them to happen to me.

It didn’t help. Time marched on. Days blended into nights and cherries ripened on trees. I woke at two in the morning on the day of their wedding. I found myself sitting bolt upright in the dark, sweating, clutching at my throat and chest, fighting for breath.

It was a blue-sky day. Not too hot and not too cold. Selby looked resplendent in a white tea-length dress. She’d told me about it in confidence before the wedding, so I knew not to expect a floor-length gown. She said it was meant to be playful, to remind Romeo of the sundress she’d been wearing the day they met. She wore white gloves and a pearl choker, and overall, much as I hate to admit it, she gave Audry Hepburn a run for her money in the style stakes.

Romeo was heartbreakingly handsome in his suit and completely wrong at the same time. His hair was neat as a pin, which made me feel violent. His shirt was so starched it stayed up when he lifted his arms, making him look like he was wearing a straight jacket.

I felt like I was walking through quicksand.

“Are you drunk?” my dad asked twice.

“Absolutely not,” I replied, offended by the suggestion, though I was indeed very drunk.

“Are you okay?” asked Lexi and my mom, taking turns studying my face and then casting furtive glances at each other.

“Of course,” I replied, a little more unhinged each time. “Romeo’s getting married today. It’s a *happy* day!”

Inside, I broke into pieces. Tiny pieces that shattered and splintered. So many pieces that even then, even on that terrible, hazy day when nothing made sense, I knew I’d never be the same again. By some miracle, I made it through the ceremony, the photos, and the canapés on the pristine lawns of the Alabaster Country Club. I even survived the doves and the fucking butterflies.

I watched as Romeo picked rose petals out of Selby’s hair, and I broke all over again. She ran her hands over his chest, straightening his shirt and tie,

touching him like he was hers, and I broke more.

Selby had very clear ideas about wedding décor and no trouble communicating them. The Country Club ballroom had been done up to meet her exacting standards. There were flowers and candles on every surface that could tolerate having flowers and candles on them. Hell, there were some flowers and candles on surfaces that didn't look like they could tolerate it. Miles and miles of fairy lights had been strung up, and believe me, I really do mean miles of the things. They met at a single point in the center of the towering ceiling and fanned out to give the illusion that we were in a wonderland tent—Selby's words, not mine. Everyone loved it. I heard lots of people commenting on it.

To me, it was pure horror circus.

My speech went okay. I have no memory of what I said, just that no one looked shocked or appalled, and Selby didn't have me thrown out, so my filter must have held out. Romeo spoke well. He was nervous, of course. His voice was hoarse and softer than usual, but he spoke well. Poetic, almost. He said some things about Selby that made bile rise in my throat, but it wasn't until he started talking about Sal that the salt really started to burn. By the time he raised his glass, tears tracked down my face.

Fortunately, I wasn't the only one. Everyone who'd known Sally had loved her. There was hardly a dry eye in the place. Selby looked at the ceiling during Romeo's speech and dabbed at her eyes with a lace napkin I suspected had been bought for that very purpose.

I sat still, like a statue, until the dancing started. When most people were on their feet and the lights were low, I got to my feet and staggered out of the venue. I turned to look back when I got to the door, though I knew full well I shouldn't. I couldn't help it. I had a sickness, and even then, I believed Romeo was the cure. He was sitting back in his seat, watching me with a hard expression I'd never seen before.

Fuck him.

I made it to the parking lot, waves of nausea rising and getting stuck in my throat. It was a still night and it had rained while we were inside. The tarmac was wet and smelled like damp leaves, dark nights, and disaster. I'd parked near the exit, a wise decision, as I'd never been more desperate to leave anywhere. My car was packed to the rafters, boxes on the back seat and clothes that didn't fit into luggage stuffed into black trash bags. The façade of the Country Club cast long shadows that bent and distorted across the hood. I

struggled with my key, hands numb and trembling so badly I couldn't make it unlock.

"Where do you think you're going?" Romeo stepped out of the shadows, his face that of a stranger.

"You know where I'm going." I'd been offered an internship at a well-known firm in Lower Manhattan. I'd mentioned it to him at least ten times in the run-up to the wedding. "New York."

His mouth opened and shut several times and his eyes changed from thunder to something that looked disoriented and almost vacant. Disbelief, that's what it was. The first murmurs of rage whispered my name.

"New York?" He said it as if it was a made-up place. A fictional place in one of the stories he used to tell me back when we rode dragons and I still believed in happy endings. "But, but..."

"Yes, Romeo. New York. New *fucking* York. I got a job there, and per the multiple conversations we've had on the topic, I'm going. I'm leaving Alabaster. Moving."

"But, but...you can't go..."

"Oh no?" My fury was fire, burning so brightly it turned the finely ground pieces of me from liquid to clear glass. "And why's that?"

"Wha—I mean, how—" His face was a picture of confusion. Brows raised, mouth forming a near-perfect O. Usually, when I saw that face on him, I rushed in. I charged in to help him, to save him. To protect him. That night, I saw it and wanted to put my fist through something. "Y-you can't go..." he whispered, "'cause we said we'd go together."

Together?

My mind whited out for a second and then came back online in an even worse state than before. "Together!?" I all but yelled. "To-fucking-gether, Romeo? You just got *married*."

My fists clenched so hard that my nails dug into my palms. I wanted, no, I needed, to break something. A window. A wall. A solid slab of concrete. I didn't care what.

"I know that," he replied angrily. "What I don't know is why you're going now, like this. I thought you'd wait until the end of summer. It's weeks away. It's my wedding day, and you're the best man. You can't leave now." I was lightheaded with anger, shaking so hard I was outside myself. "What the fuck is wrong with you? Why are you looking at me like that?" I didn't answer. "Why the hell are *you* angry, Jude? I'm the one that should be angry. It's supposed to be the happiest day of my life, and you're ruining it."

“Why am I angry?” I overpronounced each word, pausing between each one as my voice and chin shook with venom. “Are you kidding me? Are you kidding me right now? I’m angry because the best day of your life is the worst day of mine. I’m angry because we were lovers, Romeo. *Lovers*. I was yours and you were *mine*, and you threw me away.”

“Jesus,” he said, looking around to see if anyone had heard me. He took me firmly by the upper arm and hissed, “Lower your voice! And what are you talking about? That was...that was years ago, and it wasn’t...We weren’t... It was just fuc—”

“Oh no. Don’t you fucking dare!” I threw his hand off me and shouted, “Don’t you fucking dare deny it. It wasn’t just *fucking*, you fucking idiot, it was *love*. I didn’t fuck you. I *loved* you.”

I ran out of steam abruptly and breath too. Everything I’d been holding in came crashing down around me, and I made a horrible gurgling sound as the first sob tore through me. Tears poured down my face, thick, steady streams of saltwater that choked me and cut off my air.

“I loved you then, *you asshole*, and, and I love you now. I’ve loved you forever, Romeo, and you”—there was another, even deeper, more gut-wrenching sob—“you just married...someone, who, who...isn’t me.”

His face went blank. A splash of white paint on a freshly plastered wall. A kaleidoscopic turned. Spinning and spinning, throwing up a sea of blues that eventually swam together and landed on something lifeless and flat.

Over the years, I’d revisit that look many, many times. I’d analyze it, overthink it, and torture myself over and over with what it was and what it meant, but right then, I didn’t have time for that. I had to leave. I had to get as far away from Romeo as humanly possible.

My survival depended on it.

I got as far as the Lakeview Motel, thirty miles east of Alabaster. It was thirty miles farther than I should have driven in that state. I got the key to my room, an ice bucket, and directions to the ice machine. I managed to stay upright until I’d locked the door and dropped my phone and keys on the floor.

I didn’t know people could cry like that. Till it hurt. Till it hollowed you out and made you sick. Till everything burned and you didn’t think you’d ever be able to stop.

I was dimly aware of my phone vibrating and pinging where it lay a few yards from me, but I couldn’t move and lacked the inclination to try. I lay on the bed, curled on my side, feverish and shivering.

It was done. Romeo was married. There was nothing to say that could change anything and no one I wanted to say it to.

Eventually, I slept. I must have because I woke in the early hours, curtains still open, the blue-black sky that heralded a new day an ominous taunt instead of a promise.

The ice had melted, so I drank straight from the bucket, took a leak, and then checked my phone. There was a message from Lexi and my mom, and a slew of missed calls and messages from Romeo. There was roughly one message sent every half hour throughout the night.

Jude

Jude

Where are you?

Call me

I'm worried

I didn't know

I swear

Please call me

Jude

Jude

Tiger

Tiger

Please

Tiger, please

He must have had his phone in his hand because the second I read the first message, three dots appeared on my screen.

A message popped up and I knew what it was going to say before I opened it.

Is your window open?

It was a gut punch. A stab wound. A direct hit that damaged my internal organs.

I didn't think I could cry anymore. My eyes were swollen, bloodshot, and burning, and my lips were cracked open. I thought I'd cried myself out. I thought there was a limit to how many tears one person could produce.

I was wrong. Before I started typing my response, tears began falling again. This time, they were silent. They fell without me really noticing them. No longer a storm, soft rain now. Soft rain that set in.

I knew what I was doing. I knew what it was before I did it.

It was what happens when he's your Romeo, but you're no Juliet.

It was the end of our story.

The end of Romeo and me.

It wasn't the ending I wanted, and it sure as shit wasn't the ending I thought had been written in the stars. It was the truth though. The stark, ugly truth. It was the truth about life and love. Oaths can be broken. Vows and promises too.

They can be broken just as easily as hearts can.

My hands were unsteady, my phone heavy as I typed. My reply was short and concise. Two letters, not six.

No

I closed my eyes and hit send.

Then I went to the bathroom and threw up.

“IF LOVE BE ROUGH WITH YOU, BE ROUGH WITH LOVE”

Now

I’M HIDING IN THE basement of our house. The builders have left for the day, and while I could feasibly go back to Romeo’s and lock myself in the guest room until Selby gets home, this feels safer. Better. I’m farther away from him here, and space is good. I need as much space from him as I can possibly get. I can’t be around him, that’s for damn fucking sure.

I spent all day at the lake by myself yesterday, came home as late as I could get away with without looking rude, and found myself the honored guest at a meal that was so drenched in sexual tension it was a battle to swallow my food. I just chewed and chewed. Kept chewing and trying to wash my food down with wine while simultaneously trying not to look directly at Romeo.

And every time I slipped up, every damn time, his eyes were on me. A searing blue gaze that stripped me naked.

No.

No, I can’t have a repeat of that, and I sure as hell can’t have a repeat of what happened the other night. Kissing a married man and forcing your cock in his mouth is unacceptable. It’s completely unacceptable. I have to keep it together and ensure it doesn’t happen again.

I mean, yeah, if Romeo is down for a fucking that does hold more than a little appeal to me. Not going to lie about that. But Lexi’s words ring in my ears, playing on repeat, “*Men don’t leave their wives for their mistresses.*”

She’s right. They don’t. It’s a well-known fact. I don’t even need to Google it. Everyone knows that.

What absolutely no one knows is what the fuck is up with Romeo. Why's he been looking at me like that? And why didn't he stop me when I put my tongue in his mouth? Why did he kiss me back, and why did he kiss me like that? Like I was air and he was suffocating. He's married. His wife could have walked in on us. It was fucking insane. The stupidity of it makes me break into a cold sweat again.

And what the fuck was all that about the honeymoon?

This whole thing is doing my head in. I can't think of anything else, but the problem is that every time I think of something that happened, I remember something new. Something that makes more sense, or no sense, or less sense than it did seconds before. It's like the truth has become this fluid, feckless thing I can't quite get a grip on.

I laugh out loud, a soft, pitiful chuckle, and say, "Maybe you're right. Maybe I do have a funny way of remembering things."

I'm resigned, disappointed, but not surprised I've taken up talking to Romeo when he's not here on top of everything else. Seems like a pretty accurate reflection of where my mental state is at right now.

My mind has devolved into a cesspit of obsession, overthinking, and overanalyzing every tiny interaction between Romeo and me. Long-forgotten memories have resurfaced and mingled with new ones. The past and the present are no longer two separate things. The more I've thought about Romeo, the more the truth has marred and blurred, changing until I'm not sure what really happened and what I imagined.

At this point, only one thing remains certain: if I let myself get tangled up with Romeo again, I won't recover. If he's simply decided he misses dick, I'm the wrong guy for the job. I don't mean that lightly, and I'm not trying to be dramatic about it. I'm stating a fact. I cannot be the one to help him with that.

I didn't just dread his wedding. I feared it. I feared that day more than I've ever feared anything. In the months leading up to it, I lived the type of terror that made my hands and feet feel cold and my legs heavy. I was sure it would be the worst thing that would ever happen to me. The lowest point of my life.

I was wrong though. It was far from the worst day of my life. I didn't know it at the time. I thought there was no way anything could ever get worse or that I could possibly feel deeper despair.

I thought that once a heart broke, it was broken. Done.

I now know that's not the case. For me, at least, my heart didn't break once. That would've been bad, but it would have been okay. It would have been survivable. Instead, it broke over and over, every day, every month, every year. Scar tissue ripped and my heart cracked and broke down the middle. Turns out, the pain I thought would kill me in that motel room after Romeo's wedding was only a taste. A morsel. A little tidbit of what was to come.

Years of tears.

Devastation with no earthly limits.

So, no. No, I don't have it in me to fuck around and find out what it's like to have Romeo in my arms and lose him all over again.

I don't need to.

I know I won't survive it.

No.

What I need to do is keep my shit together and get out of here as soon as possible.

Ian, the site manager, has sworn black and blue he'll have the family bathroom in a semi-livable state by the end of the day tomorrow. Either way, I'm moving out of Romeo's house with or without running water.

It's obviously the sensible thing to do. The right thing.

And the next right thing will be for me to call Lexi and ask her to come and get me. That's what I should do. Yes. I should call her. I should call her right now before I lose my nerve. I should just tell her what's happened and ask her to come and get me.

The doorbell rings. The unexpected, piercing sound sends a jolt through me.

I groan loudly and drag myself up the stairs. It must be fucking Ian. He probably forgot something. Why can't he just fucking wait until he gets back tomorrow? That's what I want to know. What's so fucking important that you have to disturb the peace of a man who hasn't known a moment's peace in years and now, through every fault of his own, knows even less? For fuck's sake, Ian. What's the matter with you?

I plaster a broad, lippy smile on my face and swing the door open.

It's not Ian.

It's Romeo.

My entire spine contracts, forcing me to draw such a sharp breath that there's an audible hiss as air fills my lungs.

Romeo is standing on the threshold. He's wearing dark jeans and a faded gray T-shirt that clings to his chest. He has both hands in his pockets, shoulders raised slightly as though he's bracing against bad weather. He isn't. The weather is fine. The only thing bad here is the thing between us. He dips his head down and then looks up at me through a forest of lashes.

The air crackles.

My hand is on the door, holding it wide open, and I don't appear to be moving. I read his face for a sign, a clue, anything that will tell me what the fuck's going on.

He nods, a slow up-and-down motion that makes it look like he not only understands the question but knows the answer as well.

Something about him is different. Or the same. There's an eerie familiarity to this encounter that makes my dick swell. He looks at me openly, mouth slightly ajar, as he grazes my lips and throat with a heated gaze. My nipples tighten, pebbling and hardening as beach glass scrapes lightly over them and moves even lower.

He takes a hand out of his pocket—his right hand, I know that without thinking about it because it's the hand without a ring—and unfurls it in my direction. His fingers are long and the movement is graceful.

There's a sachet of lube clenched between two of them.

"Jesus!" I exclaim, quickly swinging the door shut in an attempt to close it with him on the other side.

I'm confused and enraged. What the fuck is he doing? He's married. Legally wed to someone else. He must be crazy. We can't do this. He steps forward, quick as a cat and twice as determined, shouldering the door open and staring me down. My resolve flounders. It's a permeable, porous thing with something hard rubbing against it. It wears down. Gives way. I'm suddenly weak and defeated. Afraid and angry about how out of control he makes me. My heart is pounding. I don't have any words. Not my own words anyway. All I can find are the words I read night after night, heartbroken and sleepless, in those awful first months after I moved to New York. Words from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

"Romeo!" I warn with enough meaning to make my voice shake, "*Tempt not a desperate man.*"

He smiles then, like the night, the day, and everything in between. I feel it right between my eyes and between my legs. It's a quick smile, just a flicker. There and then gone, and when it's gone, it's replaced by a lust so

profound there's only one other place I've ever seen it. And that was in the mirror. He doesn't skip a beat. He knows the text too. Unlike me, he always did. When he speaks, his voice isn't his voice. It's a low, thunderous rumble. Loud and determined, and not at all sorry about it.

He lowers his chin, one hand still held out to me, the other now tugging his belt open, and says, “*Give me my sin again.*”

The words cut into me, slicing this way and that and leaving me in tiny, bloody pieces. The heat from his body radiates out and curls around me, burning until I'm an inferno. A furnace of want and desire. A man on his feet, held up by nothing but longing.

I reach for Romeo through a thick fog, ignoring the small voice that shrieks at me not to. I watch as my hand wraps around his throat, squeezes hard, and then drags him roughly inside.

The front door slams shut, and I think I might have been the one who slammed it.

Blood rushes and my temperature spikes. Arousal starts leaking out of my pores. My mind moves slowly. Everything that isn't Romeo's skin and the palm of my hand is a distant memory now.

His mouth is open, his expression as serene as I've ever seen it. He looks more like a man experiencing the rapture than one in a chokehold. When I get closer, he strains against my hand, snapping at my jaw and grinding his hips against mine. Swords cross, but this time, we're not playing with sticks and shoelaces. This time, it's blood, sinew, and muscle.

It's that feeling, his cock against mine, that breaks me. The last murmurs of common sense, restraint, and moral reasoning are stripped away. I'm undone. An animal. I take the lube he's offering me and hold it in my teeth as I tear his jeans open. I spin him around, hard, so his hands land on the wall with a loud slap and pull his jeans down just enough to expose the curved shelf of his ass. I lift his T-shirt and yank it up over his head, messing his hair up just how I like it.

Fuck.

Oh fuck.

He's perfection. More perfect than perfect. His ass is so smooth and soft and round it looks like it was carved from marble. I grab it, this cheek, that cheek, both of them, squeezing them senselessly until they bear the angry tracks of my touch.

I'm gasping, snarling, groaning. I can't tell which. I only know that I've never heard sounds like the ones I'm making right now coming out of a human.

I undo my fly and take my straining cock out, rutting against Romeo's bare ass as I tear the lube open with my teeth. It spills onto my hand, and without hesitation, I find his opening and shove two fingers into it. He shouts on penetration. A wild, lustful sound that bounces back and forth in the hallway and doesn't die down completely before he releases the next one.

My forearm bulges and I pant as I jam my fingers in and out of him. This is no seduction. It's sure as hell not a soft caress. This is me opening a hole for my own gratification.

As soon as I think he can take me, hell, a little before that if I'm being totally honest, I rub the rest of the lube on my throbbing erection and line myself up.

"This what you want?" I demand, speaking into his neck and biting for good measure.

"No," he says so dreamily it almost sounds sweet. "It's not what I want. It's what I *need*."

That fucks me up worse than I already am. I hold his cheeks open and a tiny pink star stretches and distorts as I force my way in. He shouts again. Louder. Worse. Better than before. It ruptures my mind, spinning the past and the present into a wormhole until they collide.

The pressure on my dick is acute. So is the pleasure. I start to thrust before I'm ready, before I have time to think about what I'm doing. The first thrust is true. Deep and hard. A beautiful, beautiful feeling. A perfect feeling. I glide into him and fuck him so deeply he has to go up on his toes to take it. I do it again. And again.

He thrashes in my arms, beating the wall with his fists and reaching back to find any part of me he can grab onto, using it to pull me closer. I thread my fingers through the hair on the back of his head and make a fist. His neck arches back. It's beautiful too. I tilt his head, turning it slightly so I can see as much of his face as possible. His pupils are blown, black, and lazy as they search for me. His mouth is still open, tongue out as an offering to me. I take it, sucking it into my mouth and shuddering from the unmistakable taste of my Romeo.

It sobers me. No, not sobers, exactly. More like wakes me from a stupor. I pull out of him and step back. His knees buckle, and without my cock holding him up, he slumps against the wall.

“No, Jude,” he garbles, “don’t stop. Don’t stop. I’ll die if you stop.”

I fall to my knees, something I’ve imagined myself doing for years, a posture I’ve seen myself adopting over and over in my mind’s eye. In my mind’s eye, it’s always something I do as I beg him to come back to me.

I’m not begging now. I’m prying his cheeks open, holding them in both hands and pulling them apart. His ass isn’t pretty or pink anymore. It’s red. Angry and gaping. A fucked-out hole, a wide-open mouth, gaping for me. I let myself fall onto him. Into him. It’s not slow or seductive. It’s not even well thought out. There’s no finesse to my actions. I lick into him as though my life depends on it, spearing him with my tongue, grunting as I try to consume him. He’s oversensitive and raw from being fucked, and he screams when I do it. It doesn’t stop me. If anything, it spurs me on. I don’t stop until he’s slithered down the wall and onto the floor, and even then, I keep going until I’m holding him up by the hips as he fails helplessly on the floorboards.

“Tiger, you’re killing me,” he whines over and over. “I’m dying.”

When I’ve finally had my fill, I spit on my dick and eek the last of the lube from the sachet. He looks back as I do it, and I see a flicker of concentration on his features. I know that look. He’s pushing back, opening himself, offering himself to me.

Fuck. I love that.

I want to cry from the terrible sweetness of seeing Romeo like that. Doing that for me. I want to sob and hold on to him and never, ever let him go. I want to take him and steal him away and never give him back to Selby, no matter what anyone says. I want all that, but right now, there’s one thing I want more. One thing I need.

Right now, I need to expel the biggest load of my life.

I reach around and take Romeo’s drooling dick in my hand.

“Yesss,” he wails the second I touch him. “God, yes, Tiger, yes. Kill me like that. Please, *please*, kill me more.”

I stroke his dick hard and fast. I fuck him hard and fast too, aware that if he keeps talking like this, I’m going to blow in under five seconds. As it is, the pleasure is blinding. The pressure surreal. His body is stretched tightly around me, stroking me, tugging me, making me feel good. Every cell in

my body starts screaming and my heart pounds, frantically beating the only name it knows.

Romeo

Romeo

Romeo

I come the second I feel Romeo's ass clamp down around my cock. A massive white wave engulfs me. Day swallows me whole and tosses me into a blinding abyss. Everything is good. It's peaceful and lovely and bad things don't exist here. The feeling is sublime. Only one thing is wrong. I'm here and he's there, and even though I'm pretty sure I'm in heaven, I'd gladly go to hell for Romeo, so I open my lungs and roar my way back to the night. Back to dark things. Back to him. I find him on the floor beneath me, eyes screwed shut.

He's writhing in pleasure and saying my name.

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“COME NIGHT, COME ROMEO”

Now

WHEN I COME BACK to myself, I find myself bare ass on the floor, leaning against the chest in the hallway with Romeo’s head on my shoulder. Post-nut bliss is over and reality hits hard.

“Oh God,” I splutter as hot panic finds me. “Oh God, do you think anyone heard us?”

“Nah.” He sounds relaxed like he’s still floating and far away. “And besides, if anyone heard us, they’d have thought we were fighting, not fucking.”

A small snort bursts out of me, and I quickly do my best to stifle it. It’s a nervous giggle, but still, this is no time to laugh. What just happened is the furthest thing from funny I’ve ever been directly involved in.

“You better go,” I say brusquely. “We can’t be late for dinner. Your *wife* will be expecting us.”

To say that the following meal is torment doesn’t begin to describe it. Selby is not happy. The much-anticipated print for their bedroom has arrived and has not met her expectations.

“Dammit, Romeo,” she says, with a fake laugh that reads more like fury. “You just had to go and look scared, didn’t you?” Romeo does his best to look sorry, but I can tell his mind is drifting. She turns to me and explains, “Romeo has this thing where he looks scared in photos. Always. Every single time we hire a photographer, it’s the same. Perfect scenery, great lighting, perfect pose, perfect me...but when you zoom in on his face, he has this vaguely petrified expression.” She demonstrates what she means by freezing her eyes and pulling her lips back into a strange, square smile.

Ordinarily, I'd be inclined to point out that the best way to reduce people's anxiety around having their photographs taken is not to force them into situations where it's required of them, but given I just fucked her husband to within an inch of his life, I think I might let it slide.

I have a feeling I'm acting quiet and weird, not quite myself, but I'm not sure how to stop it. Can't remember how to act normal. Don't know if there is such a thing as normal when you've just done what I've done. It's a suspicion that's confirmed when Selby gives my shoulder a squeeze and says, "You okay? You look flushed."

Right as she says it, I glance at Romeo and notice an angry pink smudge on his neck. A smudge I put there. With my mouth and teeth.

I almost have a heart attack on the spot.

I'm in the ring, sparring with terror and shame and a fuckton of guilt, and I'm losing. They gang up on me, jabbing at my sides and pointing fingers at me.

My ass is sweating profusely, and I seem to be done with quiet and weird. Sadly, loud and weird is where I've landed, which I think might be worse.

"So yeah," I drawl, though I'm a hundred percent certain I'm answering a question no one asked, "the cost of living in New York is high. It's not just rent. It's food and clothing and eating out and food and..."

Fuck, I glare at Romeo, help me!

"Can I get you anything, another drink?" he asks Selby, saving me from myself as seamlessly as if I'd asked him to do so aloud.

"Oh no. Sadly, I can't. I have a crazy week at work. *Huge* meeting on Wednesday, so I have to get some work done tonight." She does that little nose scrunch thing. "You can clean up though."

With that, she leaves the table, and Romeo and I are faced off alone.

"There's a mark on your neck," I hiss.

"I know."

The fucker's gone crazier than I am because he fucking smiles when he says it. Instead of pulling his T-shirt up to cover it, he arches his neck and runs the pad of his thumb over the mark I made on him.

It's terrible what it does to me. A rush of arousal. A rush of guilt. Then fear. Then shame.

Romeo gets up from the table, stiffening slightly as he straightens. There's a quick flicker of pain, a little wince followed by a dark grin.

Oh God.

He can feel where I was.

There's another hit of arousal. Wild and rampant now. A truckload of it. A mountain of it. There's more guilt too. Heaped doses of guilt. So much guilt I can't tell if I'm drowning or floating in it.

"Maybe, like, kind of...I think maybe I should start packing," I stammer.

"You really moving out? The house didn't look close to ready."

"It's, uh, it's ready enough."

"Hmm," he says with a wry smile. His eyes are on me again. Hot and hard like they were before. Like glass scraping my skin. "Good thing I know where you live, huh?"

Sweet Jesus.

He's going to be the death of me.

He follows me down the hall, steps as nimble and light as ever, hardly making a sound as he gains on me.

"Have you lost your mind?" I demand, spinning around and looking furiously toward Selby's study. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Isn't it obvious?" he asks.

I gape in disbelief. Literally nothing about his behavior has been obvious to me in years.

He moves closer. So close I can feel the heat of his skin through my clothes. His lips dust my neck and my earlobe. My whole body erupts into gooseflesh.

"I can't stay away from you," he whispers. "Believe me, I've tried."

His eyes are soft blue. Pale and as dreamy as I've ever seen them. He's Romeo again. Not angry Romeo. Not hard, unreadable Romeo. There are no masks between us at all. It's just me and my Romeo.

"Did I hurt you?" I whisper so softly I'm not sure he'll hear me.

He steps back so I can see his face clearly. "Yeah, Jude. You hurt me."

My gut clenches. It feels like I'm breaking. I hate hurting anyone, and though I'm not always successful, I try my best never to do it. I really do. The thought of hurting Romeo though, like that of all ways? It's unthinkable.

I'm about to begin a long and sincere apology when he continues, "You hurt me good." He closes the space between us again. "You hurt me so fucking good, Tiger. You killed me and brought me back to life."

He takes my hand in his, holding it almost chastely, and then he lifts it to his lips and kisses it where my thumb and forefinger meet. His lips are soft and warm. He kisses my knuckles as I watch, enchanted. He presses my fingertips carefully into his mouth and grazes each one with his bottom teeth.

He holds my palm open and looks at it as if it's something he loves before turning his face into it and rubbing his cheek against it.

I can't move.

I can't talk.

A light kiss on the hand from Romeo, and I feel like I'm the one being killed and brought back to life.

"I'm going to come to you, okay? Tomorrow night, I'll come to you like the old days."

"Gguck," I manage.

I shut the guest room door a little more firmly than I intended to and lean heavily against it. Then my legs give way, and I slither bonelessly onto the floor.



It's the longest, most painful, torturous day in living memory. It's so bad that I don't even have it in me to get in Ian and the construction team's way. Dumb questions? No, sir, not one. Stand where no one is only to be smack in the middle of where they need to be two seconds later? Nuh-uh, not me.

I spend most of the day flat on my back on my bed, praying for nightfall. The fight to resist Romeo left me at some point last night when I was on the floor in his guest room. I know it's wrong what we're doing. I know that. I know it's a disaster waiting to happen. I know I'm probably going to get so badly hurt that I'll never recover. Or Selby will get hurt. Or Selby *and* I will get hurt.

I know that.

The thing is, I know something else too. I can't stay away from Romeo either.

By the time night draws in, I'm a different version of myself. I've had a cold shower—I have running water but not hot water. It's fine. It's no problem. In fact, when I think about it, maybe I should have been having cold showers since the second I got to Alabaster. Maybe I could have saved myself some of this anguish. Oh well. Too late for that now.

I've dressed, and I've eaten.

The only thing left to do is wait.

I wait and wait.

I wait until parts of my soul are chipped away and all that's left is a giant exposed nerve.

I wait until I'm positive he isn't coming. That I misunderstood him somehow. That he didn't mean it. That he loves Selby. That I hurt him in a bad way yesterday. That he's still ashamed of me and has remembered that about himself now.

My phone pings. I reach for it so fast I almost throw my back out.

The words that appear on my screen knock the breath out of me. The impact is unreal. It's like the last time I saw them. But this time, it's a resuscitation rather than a gut punch.

Is your window open?

I read the message three times, eyes misting up and hands shaking so badly I can hardly type my reply.

Always

It's the truth. It's truer than true. It was the truth then, and it's the truth now. Aside from one, maybe two, terrible hours the night of his wedding, it's a truth that's remained unshaken no matter how hard I've willed it to change. My window is open. It's open as wide as I can get it. A sill and a casing frame a black sky and an almost full moon.

I stay on my bed, sitting with my feet on the floor and my eyes closed, waiting until I hear that soft thud, the hollow clunk of big feet on the roof of my garage. I start shaking as soon as I hear it, and I don't mean trembling. I don't mean shaking a little. I mean shaking violently.

I know that, for better or worse, tonight is the night my life changes.

Romeo appears as if from out of thin air. The window is open one second with nothing but the night beyond it, and the next, his frame casts a dark shadow that draws the shape of him onto the moon. He ducks down and steps into the room in the same motion. Fluid and sure-footed as always.

I'm on my feet, floating into his orbit, stopping only when I'm standing before him.

"Romeo."

"Jude."

"Y-you came," I say dumbly.

He gives me one of those trademark Romeo shrugs. It's the best one I've seen yet. A single shoulder rises and curls toward me at the same time. Moonlight and stardust carve out his features, highlighting his brow and high cheekbones, his soft, fleshy lips, and the daydreamy eyes that inspired a thousand oaths all those years ago.

Simply put, he's the most beautiful man I've ever seen.

Neither of us blinks. We take each other in, eyes not leaving the other. He's fully dressed, but he looks naked. I don't know how I look, but I know I feel naked. Eventually, he half-closes his eyes and sighs softly. Then he lifts his T-shirt by the hem and pulls it off over his head. I allow myself a second to look. To appreciate what I'm seeing. His body is defined. Hard and lean with tiny nipples that look dusky in this light. Lines dip down his middle when he raises his arms.

He drops his T-shirt in a heap on the floor. I do the same. We lose the rest of our clothing the same way. He removes something, a belt, a pair of shoes, and offers it to me. I mirror his actions until we're both naked.

And fuck me, he's more beautiful now, if such a thing is possible. His skin shines silver and blue from the moon. He looks smaller and bigger at the same time. He's still the shy boy I fell in love with, but he's also a man. A man whose face is turning upward toward mine.

It's a soft kiss.

A gentle brush of his lips against mine. A whisper. A sonnet. A love poem I feel in my knees. His lips play with mine. A shallow kiss. A shallow kiss. And then one that's deep. Our tongues find each other. His. Mine. We kiss until we're lightheaded, and when we part, I keep one arm wrapped tightly around his waist. Pulling him toward me, refusing to let him go.

There's a scarlet glint, a little flash as the light hits the sacred heart pendant around his neck. Romeo breathes in deeply as I take it in my hand and bring it up to my lips. When I release it, I follow the path of the chain with my fingertips, moving it out of my way gently, and kiss his neck. He moans on contact, and when I pull away, he looks at me in a way that makes my foolish, foolish heart break into a gallop. There are stars in his eyes, and for the first time in years, I allow myself to believe they're there for me, not just a reflection of the night sky.

I want it to be true so badly that I can't breathe. I can't speak. I can't move.

Maybe he sees it. Maybe he still knows me the way he used to know me—better than anyone else ever has—and knows I'm frozen because he takes me by the hand and leads me to the bed.

He lets go of me and lies back, moving the pillow under his head until he's completely satisfied with its position and then spreads his legs as I watch.

The urge to cry is overwhelming. Emotion rushes up my throat, stabbing at my jaw and stinging my eyes. He opens his hand toward me and I take it, knitting our fingers together, and I cover him with my body. It's instantly hot. Blazing. All the points where our bodies meet are on fire.

Our kisses are slow and languid as we reacquaint ourselves with each other. Our hands are everywhere. Mine are in his hair, on his arms, under his hips, pulling him closer to me. His are on my face, on my shoulders, and around my waist.

I'm lost and found. Everywhere and nowhere. All I know is him. His body. His taste. I forgot nothing and remember it all. I prep him gently, taking my time, making sure he's ready, and when he is, he rocks his hips to help guide me in. I'm holding myself up over him, looking into his eyes when I feel myself slide past his second ring. He winces and cries out, but he doesn't blink.

"Jude," he whimpers. "*Jude.*"

He winds his legs around my waist and pulls me inside. His neck arches back, and when I'm fully seated inside him, he raises his head off the pillow and nestles it into my neck, kissing hungrily as I start to thrust.

"Jude," he says again when we've been moving together for long enough that I can no longer remember a time before or after him. There's something course in his voice. Raspy like gravel. No, not gravel, salt. "You were right. That night, the wedding, you were right. It wasn't fucking. It was never fucking..." There's salt in his eyes now too, and he blinks it back as he looks up at me. "It was love. Always love."

A damn wall cracks and breaks open. Years of tears pour out of me. I'm inside him, in his arms, and he's in mine, and I'm sobbing. I'm shuddering in pain and confusion and relief and the deepest, most intense pleasure I've ever felt. I don't know how long we move together. I'm not completely aware of my body or even his. I'm aware of my soul though, and his. The essence of two people winding together. Over and under each other. Tighter and harder. Deeper.

Deeper and deeper.

Deeper until we aren't two separate things.

We're one.

The orgasm, when it comes, is cataclysmic. It's earth-shattering. Heartbreaking. It's the first time I've kept my eyes open at climax. His are

open too. I look into them and see stars and galaxies and everything I've ever felt for him reflected back at me.

Afterward, a long time later, when we're still a tangled mass of limp arms and legs, but it's starting to dawn on me that I'm human, I say, "What the fuck?"

He gives a dry chuckle that sounds more like someone saying, "Huh," than an actual laugh. "That's pretty much exactly what I've been asking myself for the past five years." He's still on his back and my head is on his shoulder. I crane my head to get a good look at him, but he turns his away from me, averting his gaze. "I always knew you were full of shit, Jude."

His chest rises and falls beneath me several times. I want to push him, ask him, demand to know everything, but I know this is it. This is the conversation that decides the rest of our lives. Whether my heart beats or breaks. Whether I live or die.

"I knew there was no way you could stop bad things from happening to me. Obviously, no one can do that. Even at my worst, I knew it. I didn't expect you to stop all the bad things." He shakes his head to himself, and a silvery track glistens at the corner of his eye and streaks over his temple and into his hair. "I just never thought you'd be the bad thing."

I lift my head and move back a little, just enough to get a decent look at his face. "What do you mean?"

"We had that one perfect summer, remember? That one summer when we were together and things were good."

"I remember," I whisper. "I thought it would never end."

"I was happy. After my mom died, I didn't think I'd ever be happy again, but I was. That summer, God, I was so happy. It was all good, and then you went back to college, and everything got fucked. One second, everything was normal, and the next, you were telling me you were on your way to Cambridge. I called and messaged all the time, and you left me on read. I knew something was off, but I tried telling myself it was all in my mind and I was overreacting. I mean, you were busy. You were in a new country, right? There was a time difference. By the time you were due to come home, I'd almost managed to convince myself that nothing was wrong, and I'd imagined the distance between us. I was so fucking excited to see you. I called your mom three times the day before you arrived."

His lips turn down into a small, sad smile. "I called once to check what time you were landing even though your mom had sent me your flight itinerary a week before, and then I called to make sure they had space in the

car for me even though your mom *and* your dad had assured me there was plenty of space, and then, because I was such a whipped jackass, I called again to double check what time you were landing. I was ready two hours before they were due to pick me up. I couldn't wait. I was almost out of my skin at the airport. I was watching the board and holding that stupid fucking balloon..."

He sits up and swings his feet onto the carpet, turning his back to me. His back is tense, tight muscles knotted under skin. I reach out and put my hand on his shoulder, though, from his body language, I think he might shake me off. He stills briefly and then leans into my touch ever so slightly.

"I know we weren't official or anything like that. I mean, we were always encouraging each other to kiss girls and that kind of thing, so maybe I shouldn't have been so surprised, and maybe I shouldn't have taken it so badly, but holy shit, Jude. I never dreamed you'd turn up with your new boyfriend on your arm. I swear to God, I never, *ever* thought you'd do that."

"Romeo, no! He wasn't—"

"Don't bullshit me, okay. I want to get past it, but I can't if you bullshit me. I know what it was. I asked him, and he told me."

"Wait, this is Benji, right? You're talking about the time Benji came home with me for Spring Break?"

He glares at me incredulously. "Yes, I'm talking about fucking Benji! Who the fuck else would I be talking about?"

"But, Romeo, Benji and I didn't...we were never—"

"Of course you were!" he booms. "*I asked him!*"

A terrible, crawling feeling rolls in my gut. Disbelief and horror morph into a slow realization that makes the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. "And what did he say?"

"His exact words were—" Romeo flashes his eyes and tucks an imaginary lock of hair behind his ear. He raises the pitch of his voice and adds a cloying nasal quality to it. It's a pretty good imitation of Benji, I have to admit. "*I mean, we're not official yet, but Judels has brought me home to meet his parents, so you know, it's pretty serious.*"

He grabs the blanket on the end of my bed and pulls it over his lap angrily, and he's quiet for a few beats.

"He told me not to tell you I knew. He said you wanted to come out to me yourself." Romeo sighs again and a tremor of old anger shakes his head slowly from side to side. "You were the worst, d'you know that? That vacation, you were the worst. You kept making these dumb jokes and talking

crap all the time. You were acting like someone I didn't know. It took me a while to piece it together, but you were showing off for him, you dick."

He turns his head, looking back at me over his shoulder with eyes laced with anger and pain. I sit up and move next to him, tightening my grip on him, digging my fingers into the meat of his shoulder. This time, he does shrug me off.

His eyes slide shut and his voice cracks. "I was holding a balloon, Jude." Anger wavers and ripples and turns to liquid. "I was holding a fucking balloon and"—his chest heaves—"and you turned up with your new boyfriend. I waited all break for you to tell me you were gay and dating him, and you didn't even bother to do that. And then you turned up at my window in the middle of the night and tried to kiss me?" His chest heaves and his breath comes in short, jerky gasps. "I was so angry I couldn't see."

"But, Romeo—"

"No! I'm still talking! I've spent fucking *years* thinking about this and trying to work out what the hell I could or should have done differently, and here's what I've got: I should have told you, okay? I know that. I should have told you I knew you liked guys. I knew you did, but when I asked, you said no, and I didn't know what to do with that. It was the only time I ever felt you weren't being truthful with me, and it threw me. I should have clarified though. Maybe I should have told you I didn't mind and still loved and supported you. Maybe that would have helped. I don't know. I couldn't think straight. I was so hurt and angry I felt violent. I don't know why the thought of you being with a guy upset me so much when you'd always been fine with me being with girls, okay? I don't know. Maybe it's problematic of me, but I've thought about it for years. I've tried everything I can think of to reason with myself, and it doesn't help. I'm still fucking upset about it. I'm jealous, Jude, and I guess I should have told you that too, so you'd have known what you were dealing with."

He winces as he says it and turns to me with a look that makes my hair stand on end. "I'm not just jealous. I'm *jealous*. Crazy jealous when it comes to you. The kind of jealous that makes me feel sick. Really sick. You were *mine*, Tiger." He grits his teeth and speaks through them. "*Mine*. I thought you knew that." He looks like he did that day after we'd been to the lake all those years ago, after I got bitten by mosquitoes and he took my wrist and held it as if it was his. Possessive. Domineering.

I feel the same now as I did then. A rush. A rightness.

He's right.

I was his. I am his.

I put my hand on his knee and wait until he looks at me. “Romeo,” I say firmly. “Nothing happened with Benji. Nothing. I mean, he propositioned me a few times and grabbed my dick once when I was passed out, but other than that, nothing. Ever.”

Romeo leaps to his feet, flinging the blanket onto the floor and kicking it away from him as he searches for his jeans and pulls them on roughly, hopping on the spot as he zips up.

“Don’t!” His finger is pointed an inch or less from my face. “Don’t lie to me. I’m *trying* to get past this. I’m trying to find my way back to you, but I can’t do that if you lie to me.”

“I’m not lying.”

An aquamarine gaze hardens, then softens. Advancing, retreating. Coming closer and holding me at arm’s length. “I want to believe you,” he says softly. “I really want to, but—”

I search my mind desperately for something, anything I can find that will prove what I’m saying. I find it at last. “I have something to show you.”

I take out my phone and search for a long-forgotten contact. A person I haven’t seen or spoken to in years. A person I didn’t think was more than a minor character in my story. An extra. A walk-on with hardly any lines.

The message has been archived, so it takes a while to open, but when it does, I place my phone in Romeo’s outstretched hand.

Don’t ever touch me like that again. I love Romeo. I only want him

And I don't care if that makes me a dumbass

Romeo reads the message and drops heavily on the bed next to me. He rests his elbows on his knees, head bowed, as he reads it again. And again. I can practically hear the cogs of his mind grinding. “Bu...why...how?” He’s breathless and his hand is clamped over his mouth. “I feel sick,” he says when the realization hits him fully. “I feel so sick...my life. My whole life changed because of what he said.” He closes his eyes. It looks like he’s praying, but I know he doesn’t do that. “Your life too. And Selby’s. Oh God, Selby’s life too.”

When his hands start to tremble, I cover them with mine, holding them tightly. He’s shivering and is staring vacantly at the wall opposite my bed as tears roll down his cheeks. I pick up the blanket off the floor and drape it over

his shoulders. When I pull him to me, he comes easily, going soft and melting into me as I hold him.

I hardly know what to say. I understand what's just happened. I do. I understand it in words. It's just that I can't feel it. I can't process it. I can't believe it.

Romeo loved me back.

And Benji, a person I thought was a friend, lied to him. A person I knew for a few months and then cut out of my life and never thought of again broke the best thing that ever happened to me.

And I hadn't even known it had happened.

Of all the reasons I thought we ended, and believe me, I've made an exhaustive list or five hundred in my time, Benji never even entered my mind as a contender.

"We should have talked more about what was happening between us." Romeo sniffs. "Don't think I don't know that. Don't think I don't *wish* we had because I do. I really, really fucking do. It's just...I couldn't. I didn't have the words then. I was so confused. Not when I was with you. When I was with you, everything was crystal clear, but when I wasn't with you, I didn't know who I was. I needed my mom." His voice cracks. "I needed to talk to her. She'd have known what to do. I didn't. I didn't know anything, not even who I liked. Or why I liked what I liked. And I'm sorry about that, okay. I'm really fucking sorry. I was twenty years old, and I was fucked up, and I didn't have my shit worked out yet, and I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

"I know. You were ashamed of me, I get it."

His brows curve up sharply. "Ashamed of...Jude, no. I was ashamed of me. I was ashamed of who I was and what I liked. Ashamed of you? Never. I hero-worshipped you. I loved you beyond reason."

It's everything I've ever wanted to hear, but I still can't feel it. Years of pain and betrayal roar in my veins. "Why'd you go and marry Selby then?"

"You mean aside from the fact you told me to?"

My entire body goes cold from the chill that runs through me. I remember my dorm room in Cambridge. The Darth Vader poster I had on my wall. The photograph of Romeo and me framed on my desk. I remember him saying, "She's dating to marry," and I remember the thing I've tried so hard to stamp out of my mind it hardly feels like it really happened at all anymore. My words. My voice saying, "Guess you better put a ring on it then."

"Yeah," I breathe, "aside from that."

“Selby was safe. That’s what she was. Steady. The same every damn day. She told me she wanted me. You made me guess. You made me wait until I felt like I was losing my mind. Remember that summer, the good one? I’d try to outwait you. I wanted you so much I felt like I was dying. I’d make these little deals with myself. I’d say, *Don’t go tonight, stay home, and maybe tonight, he’ll come to you.* I’d tell myself, *if he comes tonight, it means he wants you as much as you want him. It means he loves you. Just relax. He’s Jude. He never lets you down. He’ll come.* But you didn’t. You never came to me. Selby wasn’t like that. She told me what she wanted with no hesitation. Hell, she told me where she wanted me to be and what she wanted me to do while I was there as well. There was no uncertainty at all. You’d always been my safe place, and right when you stopped feeling safe, right when you started feeling uncertain and scary, you shoved me into her arms and smiled like you hated me when you did it.”

I don’t answer. I swear to God, I don’t know what to say. My chest aches, and I can’t swallow the lump in my throat no matter how hard I try. Romeo keeps talking.

“I was scared. Growing up, I was a scared kid. I was a scared teen too. If I cared enough about my life anymore, I guess I’d be a scared man as well. A Little Bit Afraid of Everything, that’s what my mom and I used to call it. We used to laugh about it together. She said that was how you rob fear of its power. Sometimes, it worked, but usually, I still had this gnawing feeling that something bad was about to happen. And then it did. You were there for me after she died. You were there for a lot of it, but you didn’t see all of it. You saw my grief, and that was bad, but you didn’t see my dad’s. That was bigger than me. It was so big it terrified me. I...I used to get home early sometimes when he wasn’t expecting me. You know, when a class or activity would end early...” His voice trails off as though he’s unsure whether he should be saying what he’s saying. “I’d get to the porch, and before I even opened the door, I’d hear it.”

“Hear what?”

“Hear him crying. I mean, I guess you’d call it crying, though that’s not what it sounded like. I don’t think that’s what it was. It was howling. It sounded like an animal that had been wounded. Nothing was normal and nothing was okay. We buried my mom, but my dad died that day too. I almost did as well. You were the one thing, Jude. The one good thing I had. The one thing keeping me together. When you came home with Benji, I was sick about it. I was so hurt it felt like I was being turned inside out, and as bad as that

was, it wasn't the worst thing... The worst thing was the fear. It was physical. I can still feel it when I let myself think about it. I was so scared of losing you that I thought if you wanted to date other people, I should let you do it. I thought it was better to keep you as a friend than lose you altogether." He pauses for breath. "D'you remember the story of how my mom and dad met?"

I nod.

"Remember what my dad said about why he took so long to tell my mom he was in love with her?"

"Yeah." I remember it like it was yesterday. "He said he'd have been happy to be just friends for the rest of his life if it meant he'd get to spend time with her."

Romeo blows a tiny gust of air out of his nose and nods. "I thought that was what was being asked of me. I thought I had to choose between keeping you as a friend or losing you altogether. And I chose friend. I thought I was doing this big noble thing, setting you free even though it hurt me, so we could stay friends."

"And then there was the wedding," I say numbly.

He nods and wipes his eyes with the back of his hand. "And then there was the wedding." He lets out a low, lost whistle. "And the reception. And you and me in the parking lot. I couldn't understand it. I thought I'd done everything in my power to keep you, yet, somehow, I still lost you. When I got your message, that last message from you..."

I know the message he means all too well. One word. Two letters, not six. My greatest act of self-harm.

"I felt trapped. Boxed in. Buried alive. I'd just agreed to spend the rest of my life with Selby, and it turned out you wanted me. I've never felt anything like that. Everything around me closed in, walls, doors, everything closed in, and I kept thinking of my mom. We put her in a box in the ground, so in a weird way, I figured it made sense for me to be in one too. You have no idea how long it took me to realize that she was dead when we did it, and I was still alive."

It kills me that he's felt like this. It causes me physical pain that I feel in my bones.

For so many years, I tried to hate him. I'd think of him loving Selby and the pain of it nearly killed me. I thought there was nothing worse, but this is worse. Him loving me and thinking I'd betrayed him is worse.

"I thought you meant it when you said always," he sobs. "I really believed it. Nothing has ever hurt me like that last text from you."

My phone is still in his hand, his fingers limp, curled around it just enough to stop it from falling. I slide my thumb up and wake the screen.

I click on photos.

Then, I open a folder.

An unnamed folder.

A folder with one thousand six hundred and twenty-seven photographs in it.

His head jerks and his hand clenches tightly around my phone when he realizes what I'm showing him.

Photographs of windows. Apartment windows. Windows at work. Windows in restaurants and bars. Hotels. Lexi's house. My parents' place in Florida, and many more.

In every picture, the window is open.

When he stops scrolling, I do it for him, scrolling and scrolling all the way to the first photograph in the folder.

A photograph I took at the Lakeview Motel less than two hours after I sent him that message.

"I'm sorry," I sob, crushing him to me, knotting my fingers into his hair, and holding him as tightly as I can. "I didn't mean it. I was mad and hurt, but I didn't mean it. I could never mean it. For you, Romeo, my window is *always* open. Always. No matter what."

He strokes my hair out of my face and wipes my tears away with the pads of his thumbs. His eyes are bright red and his face is puffy and blotchy. It's not his best look, but he's still easily the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

His expression softens and his head tilts to the side. When he speaks, there's fear in his voice. And hope.

"Do you still love me, Tiger?"

"Oh, Romeo." My shoulders drop, releasing tension I didn't know I was holding. All the air leaves my lungs. I take his hands in mine and hold them against my chest as I breathe in. "Love isn't the word. You're my..."

I take my time to find the perfect words, the right words, words that will explain to him once and for all that my heart beats his name. His name only. His name always.

"To me, you're the night. The moon and the stars. You're the night. My knight. You're my best and worst nights. My first day and my last day. And if I have any choice in the matter, you'll be all my days and nights from now till I die." I lean in and kiss him, moaning and murmuring into the soft warmth of his mouth. "There has never been anyone else for me, Romeo. There won't *ever* be anyone else."

He goes limp against me, his head finding the hollow where my neck and shoulder meet and making its home there. "I love you," he says, lips and hot breath dancing on my skin. My heart feels like it's going to explode. Like it's going to burst. Like it's beating out of my chest. "I love you, I love you, I love you."

We lie down together and pull the covers over ourselves, and for a long time, all we do is repeat the same words back to each other.

"I love you."

"I love you."

Each time we do it I feel like I'm floating up, getting closer and closer to the surface.

"I love you," he says, and my lungs fill with air.

"I can breathe again," I say. "I was drowning, but now I can breathe."

"I was drowning too." He kisses me and presses his face into my chest. His arms are around me, legs too.

"Never again."

"No, never again."

We talk in fits and starts about everything and nothing. We talk about big, heavy things that make us both grow somber and serious, and we talk about things that happened last week. What music I've been listening to, and what he's been reading. He tells me about the kids he teaches. Apparently, they call him The Mad Professor, and that makes me cackle. I tell him how Lexi and my parents are without leaving anything out, and I tell him about New York. I tell him everything. Important things, unimportant things.

"So, let me get this right, you're saying you have onion bagels with *peanut butter* for breakfast, Tiger?"

"Yep, best combo ever."

"Hmm, I'm not sure how I feel about that."

"I'll get you one. You'll love it. You'll see."

Every so often we stop talking because we can't stop kissing. And then we stop kissing because we can't take our eyes off each other.

It's a shock when I notice the light in the room has changed. The black of night has faded. A new day has dawned.

"Shit," I say, suddenly sobered. "You better get going."

He checks his watch and gets out of bed. He dresses quickly in total silence. I watch him, unsure if I'm watching my life starting or ending. My heart is hammering in dread at the thought of him leaving, not to mention the thought of him going back to Selby.

When he's dressed, he leans over me and kisses my cheek.

It's the one thing we haven't spoken about. The shiny white elephant in the room, so to speak.

Maybe he sees the fear in my eyes or was going to say it anyway, but either way, he says, "I'm going to leave her."

My heart shifts gears. Fear to rampant, euphoric hope in under five seconds, only to be suddenly and spectacularly snuffed out by guilt so big and heavy it feels like a weight on my chest.

"It's not your fault, Jude," Romeo says quietly. "This is on me, not you. She has a big day at work, so I'm going to wait until she gets home tonight, but then I'm telling her it's over, okay?"

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“I DRINK TO THEE”

Now

THE SOUND OF THE doorbell jolts me from sleep. I stumble downstairs in nothing but a pair of sleeping shorts, thinking unpleasant things about Ian and his team and renovations in general. It isn't them. It's Romeo. I can't tell if he's slept in the few hours since I saw him. His eyes are glassy and still a little red, but they're clear. He's dressed in a pair of khaki shorts and a white T-shirt, and he has a cup of takeout coffee in his hand.

He holds it out to me and says, “I brought you a coffee. Thought you might be tired.”

I can't stop the smile that takes over my face, so I don't even try. “Aren't you tired too?”

“I am. I'm beat.”

“Where's your coffee then?”

He grins sheepishly and goes pink from his neck to his ears. “I, er, I guess...I guess I just wanted an excuse to take another look at your face.”

Fuck me. The things that makes me feel.

He's still grinning and holding the cup up. I take it from him and take a sip. It's heaven. Strong and sweet but not too sweet.

I raise the cup to Romeo in a silent salute and drink again. He's watching me with a soft, mushy look on his face, which is doing things to my heart. Somersaulty, head-over-heels, set-a-match-to-your-life kinds of things.

“Want to share?” I offer.

He takes the cup and has a sip.

It's almost nothing. It's silly at best, but this little interaction makes me happier than I've been in years. Without thinking, I lean down and plant a

kiss on his lips. He takes me by the back of the neck and kisses me back with meaning before we realize the front door is still open and we're in clear view of our neighbors. We stop as suddenly as we started, and I crane my neck left and right to ensure nobody saw.

"Get in here," I say, kicking the door shut and pinning him against the wall once he's inside.

He offers me another sip of coffee, and I take it.

It's better than good.

It's perfect.

It's my exact order.

A triple shot of shaken espresso with oat milk and a pump of salted caramel syrup.

"How did you know this is my drink?" I ask.

"Lucky guess," he answers, not holding eye contact.

I offer him another sip, and when he reaches for it, I pull the mug away.

"No, seriously, how'd you know?"

He goes even pinker than he was earlier. "I kind of follow your socials. You post a lot pics of your coffee, you know that?"

"Which socials?"

He's so pink now his neck looks mottled. "All of them."

"Is that right?"

He shifts his weight from one foot to the other, looking more uncomfortable by the second. "I know it's not cool, I-I know that. It's just..."

"What's your alt account name?"

"I'd rather not say."

"Tell me," I say, digging my fingers into the precise spot on his side that makes him shriek with laughter.

"No."

"Tell me." I hit the spot again.

"It's dumb." He laughs, thrashing from side to side, trying in vain to bat my hands away from him.

"Tell me." This time, I'm serious, and he can tell.

"Promise you won't laugh?"

"I mean, I don't know. How dumb is it? Because if it's like mild to medium on the dumb scale, then sure, I promise, but any dumber than that, and I'm afraid I can't be held accountable for my..."

"It's ILTTD2, okay? There. Are you happy now?"

"ILTTD? What's that?"

He takes the cup from me, has a long sip, and then holds the cup up near his face, obscuring his mouth from view. He looks different now. Serious, almost scared. Shy boy spilling secrets.

“ILTDD stands for...fuck, I can’t believe I’m saying this aloud.” He rolls his eyes as he psyches himself up. “It stands for I Love Thee Thou Doth, okay?” He squirms and looks away, trying not to smile but smiling from ear to ear nonetheless. “Are you happy now? I told you it was stupid. I was in a bad place when I made the accounts.”

“I love thee thou doth. *That’s* your alt account handle?” My voice lilts up at least two octaves. “You love me mou moth?”

“Oh God, no. That’s awful, Jude. Don’t say that again, okay? Don’t say that to anyone who isn’t me. There’s a limit to how much one can butcher the language and get away with it, even you. I’m serious.”

It’s the kind of laugh that starts with an explosive gust that almost doubles me over and escalates quickly until my lips are peeled back and I’m not sure if I could get my face back to normal if my life depended on it.

“Oh God,” says Romeo, laughing too. “I forgot what you’re like. I mean, I knew it was bad, but I forgot just how bad, you know?”

When I’ve managed to calm down to a splutter that no longer poses a serious risk of making coffee spray out of my nose, I take a sip of coffee and hand the cup back to Romeo. He takes it from me and sets it on the console table to his right. His hand drifts up and long, graceful fingers curl into the hair that leads from my navel to my cock.

He’s close to me, close everywhere, hands on my chest, lips on my lips.

“I do, okay?” he whispers. “I love the fuck out of you.”

Every good feeling in existence expands and blooms in my chest. I’m light. For the first time in years, my feet aren’t made of stone. I’m floating, flying, suspended by nothing but the fluttering beat of my heart.

I take Romeo in my arms and hold him as tightly as possible. He struggles a little, but only because he’s trying to get closer to me.

I breathe him in and neither of us moves until the doorbell rings again. This time it is Ian. I let the guys in, and then Romeo and I head down to the basement without saying a word. The door closes with a soft *snick* that’s quickly followed by the sound of a deadbolt sliding into a latch. It’s a sound that may as well be a match dragged over sand and powdered glass. Friction and heat. Red phosphorous changes to white and the air in the room ignites.

He has his hands in my pants in under two seconds, and two seconds after that, said pants are knotted around my ankles. We don’t make it to the sofa.

We fall to the floor and roll around on the kilim rug my mom bought in Morocco. I stroke his cock through his shorts, feeling it lengthen and harden under my touch. His lids slide to half-mast and he hums into my ear as he curls his hand around the base of my dick. We stroke like that, slow and dreamy, until saliva pools under my tongue.

“Want you,” I pant. “Want you in my mouth.”

Romeo has the same idea. “No, me first. Need it, Jude...need to taste you.”

It takes us a lot longer than I care to admit to work out that there’s a way for us both to get what we want. I swivel around, lying on my side on the floor, and ungracefully shove as much of his dick into my mouth as I possibly can. He does the same. It’s instant bliss. A salty burst in my mouth, the ridge of a thick, blunt head pushing my tongue down and hitting the back of my throat. Warm lips forming a vacuum around my dick, swallowing me whole.

I paw at his ass as I bob my head, kneading soft flesh in both hands, prying his cheeks open and tracing a line along his cleft. He sucks my dick gently. Softly, softly, then hard, not stopping for air. Not stopping at all.

I pull off with an audible pop of lips and lick a broad stripe from his crown all the way up the haphazard veins that lead to his balls. I take one and then the other into my mouth, tonguing sensitive flesh gently as he moans around my cock. Each sound sends rumbling tremors through me. Tremors that grow and expand, stretching me and making me swell in ways I didn’t know I could stretch or swell.

I lick the tips of two fingers and run them over his opening. It pulsates under my touch and unlocks a different, deeper sound. I roll him onto his back, kneeling on either side of his head, and pull his knees back to his chest so I can see him. All of him. Smooth, creamy skin darkens where it puckers. I circle him gently. His hole is puffy and a little swollen from where I’ve been, and sweet Jesus, that turns me on.

I run my tongue along the seam that knits his balls together and don’t stop until I’m eating his ass. I lap at his crease, teasing and nudging it open with my tongue. He sucks me in earnest now. Frantic. Hungry. Not soft. His hands claw at my thighs, nails raking my skin as I thrust into his throat.

I don’t just feel like I’m floating now. I’m not just weightless. I’m tense. Full. Full to bursting. There’s pressure everywhere. In my dick. In my balls. In my face.

It’s everywhere.

It’s too much.

I can’t contain it.

I can't.

And then, I'm catapulting through time and space.

Romeo keeps sucking. He doesn't stop until the pleasure is blinding, and even then, he keeps on. It's never-ending. The end of one story. The start of a new one.

Before my body has jerked and spurted the last of its pleasure into him, I start stroking his dick like I mean it. Smooth skin travels up and down sinew and steel. I watch, transfixed, as his body stiffens, hips arcing off the floor, and his meatus opens. Thick, hot ribbons of semen hit the back of my tongue.

It's heaven.

For once, it's not heaven and hell. It's just heaven.

We sleep where we lie, waking sometime later and starting all over again. At some point, he goes upstairs and returns with an apple and a bottle of water. While he's gone, I drag myself onto the sofa, stretching sore muscles and using my fingers to iron out a crick in my neck.

Romeo opens the water and drinks half of it before offering the rest to me. He kneels on the floor and watches quietly as I drink and eat, circling his hand tightly around my shaft as he tugs life back into my spent cock.

"I get the distinct impression I'm being fed and watered for the sole purpose of getting me ready to be of sexual service to you," I tease.

He gives me a filthy smile. "History has shown that we both have a couple of major blind spots when it comes to each other, my friend, but in this case, you're reading the situation dead right."

I drop the bottle and apple core onto the side table, and he gets to his feet. He rifles through his shorts till he finds the lube. He gives it to me and turns, arching his back just enough to provide me with the access I need. The sight of him like that, his naked golden skin and tan lines, back curved, ass offered sweetly to me, is almost enough to make me start crying again.

Instead, I kiss the back of his thighs and draw lines with my tongue where his ass and legs meet as I slide my fingers into his heat. I'm as gentle as can be, and he accepts the intrusion with only the softest sighs.

When he's ready, he straddles my hips and holds me by the root as he lets gravity bring us together. He runs his hands up and down my chest, taking a pec in each hand and squeezing hard. My biceps and triceps are next. Then it's my pecs again.

There's a base hunger in his eyes that makes them look dark.

"How did you do it, Tiger?" He looks pained, unspeakably beautiful, teeth clenched, lips parted in a grimace as he posts up and down on my cock.

There's a slight easing as he slides up and a slow, grinding squeeze as he slides down. "How the hell did you go and get hotter? *How?* You were already so fucking hot. Nearly lost my mind when I saw you in the store... Didn't know if I wanted to kiss you. Or kill you. Wanted to kill you...wanted to kiss you... Couldn't tell which... Just knew I *wanted* you."

He rolls his hips in a way that makes us both moan and leans down to kiss me. I card my fingers through his hair, holding on, keeping his face close to mine, stamping this moment into a memory I'll keep forever.

It's the kind of sex that stops and starts, changing from slow to furious and circles back to two bodies moving together leisurely again. It's making love, not fucking. Being close to each other, not orgasm, the only goal.

Eventually, when we've spent every drop we have on each other, he lays his head on my chest and doesn't move until I soften and slip out of him.

The big, shiny white elephant stands in the corner of the room, stamping its foot and growing larger and louder as the minutes tick by.

Lexi's voice and the collective experience of people far more sensible than I am whisper, "*Men don't leave their wives for their mistresses.*"

Hours have passed.

It's late in the day.

Somehow, we've managed to spend most of the day curled up in each other. Upstairs, I hear Ian and the team packing up and getting ready to leave. Romeo dresses quietly, each garment putting more and more space between us.

I put my shorts on, and Romeo looks away as I tie the drawstring. When we're both dressed, we sit on the sofa and face the TV.

"Do you love her?" I ask, unintentionally borrowing someone else's voice.

He's quiet for several seconds, and though I'm not looking at him, I hear his jaw click twice before he answers.

"I do love her," he says eventually, and my heart drops so hard I'm not sure I'll recover. "But not the way a man should love his wife." Air fills the void in my lungs, but it's shallow and shaky. "I thought I would. At times, I even thought I did. I was fucked up and infatuated with her when we met. I'm not going to deny that. I mean fuck, she's impressive. I couldn't believe a woman like her would want a guy like me. I thought I'd get over you and my feelings for her would grow into love. I swear I did. I wouldn't have married her if I didn't. I'm an asshole, but I'm not that kind of asshole. It's important to me that you know that."

“I do know that,” I say quietly. As much as what he’s said is a relief, I need to know more. *Pick, pick, pick. Rip, rip, rip.* “Does she love you?”

He’s thoughtful as he mulls the question over. “I mean, yeah, I’d say she loves me as much as it’s possible to love someone you don’t really like. Someone you don’t know. She’s going to be pissed and hurt, Jude, I know that. Divorce isn’t in her five-year plan, but she won’t be surprised, not really. She knows I’m not happy, and while she’ll never admit it, I know she isn’t happy either. I irritate the shit out of her. She belongs with someone strong and ambitious. Someone who knows where their car keys are and who’s absolutely positive what day of the week it is. Someone who’ll fight with her because they care enough to, you know? We’ve talked about separating in the past, and recently, it’s been coming up more. I sleep in my old room more often than in the main bedroom with her. It upset her at first, but recently, I’ve started to think she prefers it. I’m not saying you aren’t a big factor in my decision to leave. You are. Of course you are, but you’re not the only one.”

After Ian calls out to let me know he’s leaving, Romeo and I head upstairs. It’s late afternoon, not yet evening, but the light is already changing. Bright, glaring rays have grown muted and long. Romeo checks his pockets. He has his keys but not his phone. He’s about to head down to the basement to look for it when I pull it out of my pocket and hand it to him.

“You left it on the side table,” I say.

He takes it, shakes his head at himself, and then nods his thanks.

The air between us exists in a vacuum now. Tight and compressed. Under pressure. He turns to leave, and seeing the back of him, his graceful lope and unruly hair, might be the most terrifying sight I’ve ever seen. More terrifying than watching him walk over to Selby that first time. More terrifying than seeing him wait at the altar for her, and even more terrifying than seeing him in my rearview mirror when I drove away from him after the wedding.

I feel the same now as I did then. Frozen. Paralyzed. Rooted to the spot and completely unable to move.

No.

Not this time.

Not again.

This time has to be different.

This time, I see him go, and I find my voice. It’s a voice that’s broken and cracking, but it’s mine.

“*Romeo!*” He turns, brows raised in the start of a smile or a question, I’m not sure which. “Come back to me,” I plead, fully aware of how pathetic I

sound. “I can’t live without you, so *please*, come back to me.”

He’s back in my doorway in four long strides, and I’m in his arms. He holds me so tightly my rib cage is forced to adjust. When my breathing slows, he brushes my hair back off my face and says, “When I get there, I’m going to shower and pack some clothes, okay? I’m going to tidy up my notes and get Tiger ready, and when Selby gets home, I’ll tell her I’m leaving. I don’t know how long it will take. She might kick my ass out in under ten minutes, or it could take a while. I’m going to give her as much time as she needs ’cause I owe her that much, at least.” I sniff and nod. “But the second we’re done, the second I leave that house, I’m going to message you to let you know I’m coming home.”

“Home?” I squeak as my vision goes blurry.

He kisses me lightly on the cheek and then on the forehead, cradling my head in his arms as I let myself lean on him. “Yeah, home.”

This time, when he goes, I let him. I watch him walk until the silvery figure of him disappears into the Dark Forest.

I take a quick shower. The water’s still cold and tonight it makes me shiver, and then I eat everything I find in the fridge that looks halfway decent. After that, I sit on a kitchen stool and watch the minute hand on the clock above the pantry door creep around in an agonizingly slow circle.

My mind is a dumpster fire. A trash heap. A mess of past betrayals and catastrophic misunderstandings. Thoughts and fears colliding and amplifying. I think about calling Benji and using every curse word I know, and a good few I plan on inventing, and I type several messages to Lexi preemptively asking her to come and get me in case things go badly here. I think of Selby and how what we’ve done will hurt her, and I hate myself for it. At the same time, I know I’d do it all over again, which makes me feel better and worse in equal measure.

When all the thinking does less than nothing to improve my mood, I scroll through my socials and do an audit of the posts ILTTD2 has liked over the past year in an attempt to numb my brain.

The answer is every single post...except for the ones where I’m pictured with Sam.

For some reason—most likely to do with the fact my mental health could best be described as unraveling rapidly—I find that completely hilarious and start laughing hysterically, only just managing to curtail the outburst before it turns into tears.

The minute hand moves slowly.

Slower than slowly.

It's made a full circle twice now.

It's the worst form of torture I've ever felt.

It's okay, I tell myself for the forty-third billionth time. He was probably packing for the first hour. She's only been home for an hour. Maybe less if she got home later than usual. She had a big day at work. Romeo said so. It could all still be fine. He could still be talking to her. There's no reason to think she's convinced him to stay.

I fight the rampant urge to rush over to Romeo's house to see if Selby's car is there. I manage not to, but only because I know damn well she parks in the garage, not in the driveway, so I wouldn't be able to see it either way. All my going over there would do is make me look as insane and obsessed as I feel.

After several lifetimes worth of catastrophizing, the fight leaves me. I hold my phone in both hands, mind vacant and beaten, and focus every ounce of my intention on willing a message to pop up.

Never having successfully manifested anything in the past, I almost drop my phone in shock when a message alert flashes on my screen.

On my way to you now

A long, strangled sob leaves me as I breathe the words in. I drop my phone on the counter, vision blurring as walls, ceilings, and doorways rush past me.

The dusty, gnarled wings of my heart slowly unfold and expand, stretching out for the first time in years. Their wingspan has increased since the last time they beat. They were downy and soft then. Fragile and weak. Now they're strong. Fully fledged. Fully grown. Battle-scarred but more powerful than before.

There's wind in my face, and I swear, my feet aren't touching the ground.

Streetlights and swings flash past me. White oak trees and a slide set too.

It's dark in the park, but I see a familiar flash of white in the distance. A silvery blue whisp with the shadow of a dog orbiting around him. When he sees me he lets the big bag he's carrying fall from his shoulder, pausing for a second to drop Tiger's bed and everything else in his hands on the ground.

"Romeo!" I yell.

Then he's flying too.

His flight is graceful, long limbs working in concert, a strong up-and-down motion that propels him straight into my wide-open arms.

We crash into each other at speed, and I swing him around, the force of the motion launching his feet into a broad arc as they sail through the air. His

heart is racing, beating frantically against mine. When we land, I kiss every part of his face I can reach with my lips and garble nonsensically into his neck.

"Is this real? Am I real? Am I awake? Are you here? Is this real 'cause, 'cause I've had dreams like this before, and they never end well."

His eyelashes are wet, and he's nodding and saying, "It's real," over and over. "I'm here. We're both here."

"Is Selby okay?" I ask when I can.

A shadow passes over his features like a cloud blocking the moon. His bottom lip shakes when he speaks. "She's pissed and hurt, but I was right, she's not surprised. She said she's going to tell everyone that she's the one who kicked me out. I said I was okay with that, which I think may have pissed her off more because she threw one of those wicker baskets at me. It hit me here."

He indicates to his left eyebrow, and I see a dark glint and a fine stream of blood running down to his cheekbone. The sight of him like that, bloody and wounded, is enough to make me violent. I have to consciously remind myself that we wronged her badly to get myself to calm down. "And, and, I told her she could keep the house."

I'm still trying to come to grips with the fact that he's bleeding and I can't do anything to defend him. I've lifted the hem of my T-shirt, and I'm using it to clean him up, so it takes a minute before his words penetrate.

"But, Romeo," I say when they do, "your mom left that house to you. It was yours before you were married. It's your inheritance. It's not community property."

"I know. I do know that, but Selby put a lot of capital into it, and well, let's be honest, I've been a shit husband to her. She deserves to have something to show for the last five years. And besides, it's time. That house stopped feeling like a home a long time ago. I've been living with ghosts, stuck, unable to move on. I've stayed for a lot longer than I should have. I know that now, and I'm ready. It's time to let go."

I wipe his brow gently, relieved to see the cut isn't deep, and I let my T-shirt drop. I'm pretty sure I know what this means for me, but fuck it, after how badly we've screwed this part up in the past, I want to be sure. I really, really need to be sure.

"So, d-does this mean you're mine? For real? Mine to keep?"

Two gentle lines cut into his cheek. "I don't have a lot to offer you, Jude. I don't have much in the way of savings, and I'm pretty much jobless *and*

homeless, so I'm not what I'd call much of a catch." He laughs the slightly unhinged laugh of a man who just took a flamethrower to his entire life. "I mean, I have some old furniture, a bunch of individually crated thrift store art, and a dog that sheds a lot of hair, and that's it." His hands are open at his sides and his smile fades. His eyes meet mine. "All I have to offer you is my bruised, bleeding heart. It's not much, but if you want it, it's yours."

My chest caves and rapidly expands as scar tissue stings and sparks and slowly starts knitting itself back together. I cup his face gently and pull him closer. The balmy night air caresses my skin, heating and cooling it simultaneously, sending a subtle tremor through me. A forewarning. An omen. I'm about to speak my truth.

"That's the only thing I've ever wanted."

He leans in, his mouth open and soft, his tongue looking for mine and sucking it gently into his mouth when he finds it. It's a knee-knocking kiss that makes the ground beneath us feel like it's spinning. We kiss and kiss, gulping down pain and regret and turning them into something different. Drinking each other in, savoring every sip as bitterness turns sweet. Neither of us hiding or in a hurry.

We kiss like men with years of tears to make up for and a lifetime to spend doing it.

When we surface, Romeo looks up and smiles broadly. "Look where we are, Tiger."

We're in the wonky, near-semi-circular shadow Inferno casts when the moonlight hits him. In fact, we're standing right where we were the day we served him mud cakes for the first time and he almost lit Buddy on fire.

"Come on," says Romeo, hoisting himself onto the boulder in a way that makes it look easy, "for old time's sake."

I clamber after him, losing my footing twice, nearly concussing myself in the process. "Jesus, has this become more treacherous, or have I gotten wiser to danger?"

"You're just out of practice."

"And what, you're *in* practice?"

"Yeah, course I am. I come here all the time." He holds his hand out to help pull me up and glances down, hesitating for a moment and adding, "I still tell Inferno my secrets."

I lie next to him, curling an arm under my head to make myself comfortable. "Really?" I tease. "I thought you said it was just a rock."

"Oh, Jude." He sighs patiently. "It was never a rock."

We both look up at the starry night sky and breathe so heavily air hisses as it moves in and out of our lungs. I can't speak for Romeo, but to me, it feels like I'm breathing easy for the first time since the day he met Selby. No, before that. Long before that.

"What kind of things do you tell him?" I ask, curiosity getting the better of me.

I expect him to laugh it off, but he doesn't. Instead, he turns his head so he's facing me and his lips are almost touching the stone. He places one hand flat on the rough surface, stroking it as reverently as one would a mythical beast known to have a temper.

"Inferno," he whispers, "I miss him. It's been so long, and I still miss him so much. Why can't I forget him? Why can't I move on?" He flicks his eyes at me as the start of a shy smile makes his lips curl at the corners. He turns back to Inferno, nodding as though the giant rock has spoken. "Oh yeah? It's 'cause we're fated mates, huh? Well, you're a dragon, so you would think that, but I'm human, and that's not how it works for us."

I place my hand over Romeo's and move my face close enough to feel his breath on my lips. "Romeo's right, but he's also wrong," I say to my old friend, the stone dragon. "We may not have fated mates in this realm, but we do have people who are perfect for us. People who were made for us." My eyes sting with tears suddenly and without warning. "We get one in a lifetime. Only one." I lean in and kiss Romeo softly. "We call them soulmates."

He bites back a smile. "Thought you didn't believe in soulmates."

"I didn't. But I was wrong."

“GIVE ME THY HAND”

Now

IT’S A STILL, BREATHLESS morning. The car has been packed since last night. The tank is full. The tires have been checked. We’re ready.

It’s time to go.

Tiger pants cheerfully in the back seat. He’s been anxious for the last few days, even more reluctant to leave Romeo’s shadow than usual since he first caught sight of the boxes and luggage.

Our house appears in my review mirror, then the park, then Romeo’s house. Romeo’s old house. It’s hard not to feel anything about it. It’s the end of an era. A terrible, beautiful era that shaped us both in terrible and beautiful ways. An era that saw us finding each other, loving each other, and losing each other. As real and heavy and recent as it all is, there’s a lightness too. A rightness. A newness. An understanding that sometimes life is a series, not a standalone book. And a profound, absolute certainty that our story is about to get good.

I drive down the main road at precisely thirty miles per hour despite the early hour and the fact we’re the only people on the road. When I get to Jameson Drive, Alabaster’s most ridiculous, almost-always-deserted road with no fewer than three completely unnecessary four-way stops, I observe them obediently.

“Hey, d’you remember that time my mom got pulled over here and fined for not stopping?” Romeo asks.

“Yeah.” I smile. “I was just thinking about that.”

“Remember what she said to the cop when he finished writing her up?”

“Yeah, she said”—I straighten my posture slightly and widen my eyes —“Officer, may I ask if you believe in your heart that this street *needs* three four-way stops?”

“And that ass had the nerve to say, ‘No, ma’am, I don’t.’”

We both chuckle, and I add, “I loved it when she was telling your dad the story and she said, ‘And, Mike, that man dead-ass looked me in the eye and said, ‘No ma’am, I don’t.’”

“Dead-ass,” giggles Romeo. “I loved it when she said things like that.”

“She was a phenomenal swearer. She had a talent for it. She used curse words so sparingly, but she really had a gift for knowing when to slap one into a sentence for maximum impact.”

“I forgot about her talent for swearing.” He laughs again and gives me a happy-sad look with a glimmer of gratitude.

It feels good to remember. Even though it hurts, it feels really good to remember.

The narrow street widens and houses and buildings give way to green.

“You know what she told me once?” Romeo says.

“Tell me.”

“Now, I have no memory of this, so you’ll have to take it with a grain of salt, but...”

I can tell from the way his eyes are dancing that this will be good, but it looks like he’s decided to dangle it in front of me and make a meal of it. “Oh, come on. Spit it out.”

“She told me once that after we met that first day in the park, I was talking about you nonstop, and *apparently*—again, please remember I have no memory of this—I kept saying, ‘Tiger has muscles to the sky.’”

I curl a bicep and give him my biggest shithead grin. “Oh God,” I say happily. “So this is what self-actualization feels like.”

He laughs till he lets out a tiny, gruff snort. “I knew I shouldn’t have told you. As I was saying it, I literally thought *this is a mistake, his ego can’t handle it...but*”—he changes from smiling to serious—“I want you to know because I know she’d be happy I’m with you. She’d be proud of us. I know it. Like, know it *deeply*.” He digs his fingers into his chest and taps twice. “You know?”

“I know.” It’s quiet in the car except for the metronome thud of Tiger’s tail whipping against the back seat. “D’you know that the last thing I ever said to her was that I’d look after you?”

He acknowledges it with a tiny, knowing quirk of his lips. He does know that. I told him many times when he was in my bed in the middle of the night and I was the only thing holding him together. “I meant it too. I won’t let anything bad happen to you ever again, Romeo. Nothing bad. *Ever again.*” The strength of my intention forces my rib cage to expand. “I mean it. If anyone or anything comes for you, they’ll have to come through me.”

He tilts his head to the side, trying not to smile as he takes me in. “Oh, Jude, you know you can’t stop bad things. I don’t expect you to. No one can.”

“Um, but, bruh, you just said I had muscles to the sky. You *literally* just said it.”

His jaw drops in indignation. “Bruh?”

“Fine. But, *baby*, you just said I had muscles to the sky.”

He pushes the corners of his mouth down hard to stop the threatening smile. “Better.”

“Say it,” I demand.

“No way.”

“Say it, or I’ll stop the car. Don’t think I won’t because I absolutely will.” I give him the most menacing glare I can muster and start slowing the vehicle. “Say it right now, I mean it.”

Laughter bubbles out of him in low, husky waves. “Fine! I believe you. Are you happy now?”

“Happy?” I run my hand up and down his thigh, squeezing deeply. My heart is full. Swollen and plumped up. Beating powerfully without a net of old scars caging it. “Nah, happy doesn’t begin to describe it.”

We hold eye contact for a second and then turn our attention to the road. Ahead of us, two hundred yards or so from where we are, there’s a join. A tiny step down where the tar intersects. A tear in time. A before and an after. A place where then and now meet.

We don’t discuss it. We don’t say a word.

He holds out his hand to me. His fingers are long and splayed open. I know what it is. An offering. A pledge. A new kind of oath.

I take it.

We knit our fingers tightly together, lifting our feet and throwing our heads back, screaming and laughing as we hurtle into the future.

“STONY LIMITS CAN’T KEEP LOVE OUT”

EIGHT MONTHS LATER

ROMEO SITS AT THE dining table with pages strewn all around him, some on the table, some crumpled on the floor at his feet, and others stuck to the fridge and kitchen cabinets with magnets and washi tape. The walls in the apartment are blue, a nice contrast to the brick wall in the living room. It’s a dusty blue two or three shades darker than Romeo’s eyes. When I painted my apartment years ago, I redid them twice in an effort to achieve a perfect glass-bottle blue, but despite that, it seems the match was a little off.

Turns out, the color doesn’t matter that much. Now that Romeo’s here and we’ve hung all of Sal’s paintings up, you can hardly see the walls. There’s art and gilt frames everywhere.

It’s a lot.

It’s giving Dark Academia Meets Mad Professor.

I couldn’t possibly love it more.

Romeo taps at his keyboard as I approach, a soft *rat-a-tat-tat* that’s synonymous with home to me now. His lips are ajar, an incisor resting on pillowy bottom lip. Daydreamy eyes are wide and slightly glazed over as he watches words appear on his screen. His hair is overlong and unruly, curling at the base of his neck.

He’s a vision. The answer to every question I’ve ever asked. The most beautiful man I’ve ever seen.

My friend. My lover.

My Romeo.

I pad over to him quietly, bare feet on cool timber, reaching out and stroking his shoulder to bring him down to Earth gently.

He blinks and a blunt tooth scrapes over skin, releasing it as his jaw drops ever so slightly.

As always, he looks a little surprised to see me, like he wasn't expecting me to be here or wasn't expecting to find himself in a New York apartment. He draws a quick breath and surprise gives way to a too-big-to-be-cool smile.

"Morning," he says, hands traveling up my arms, scouring the hair he finds there, and pulling me closer. "Did you sleep well?"

"Mm..." I run my fingers through his hair, combing it gently. "So good. You?"

A hand drifts and fingers curl in the dark hair that runs from my navel to my cock. He tugs at the drawstring of my linen pants and his bottom lip juts out in a tiny pout.

"Why all these clothes, Tiger?"

I laugh and bat him away. "Early meeting," I remind him. "You should've woken me if that's your mood."

"I know." He sighs. "I'll regret it all day, but you looked so peaceful I couldn't bring myself to disturb you." He tilts his head back and offers me his mouth.

I kiss him, stamping my lips lightly against his, grinding my stiffening cock against his hand as it moves down my body. "I'll come home early tonight, okay?" He strokes once or twice, just enough to ensure that my brain goes offline. "I'll make it worth your while. I'll make it so you can't sit all day tomorrow without thinking of me."

"You promise?"

I laugh and kiss him again, reluctantly tearing myself away from him. "D'you wanna come to Sanctum with me? We can get bagels." I say it like it's not something we do almost every weekday.

He glances back at his screen and does a fairly decent job of acting like he's giving the matter serious consideration. Then he pushes his chair back and leads the way to the shower.

His ass is perfection in pajamas. A gentle curve. A perfect peach.

I can't resist it.

I reach out and grab it. A cheek in each hand, humming happily as I dig my fingers into supple flesh.

“I have some terrible news for you, Jude...”

“Really? What’s that?”

He looks back and gives me a devilish grin. “You’re going to be late for work.”



Romeo ties Tiger’s leash to a post at the entrance of Sanctum while I place our orders. Onion bagel with peanut butter for me and bacon, egg, cream cheese, and chives for him. He watches, shaking his head and grimacing as I bite into my bagel. He remains wholly unconvinced about my topping choice.

“You’re your mother’s son, Jude,” he says.

I wait until our eyes meet. Glass-bottle blue softens and goes misty, almost as though he knows what I’m going to say before I say it. “So are you.”

We sit at a table by the window so we can keep an eye on Tiger and eat in companionable silence. Silence that’s interrupted by a jarring, bird-like squawk. I turn to see who the owner of such an abhorrent sound is, and I’m taken aback to find it’s a very large, suit-and-tie man in his forties. From the look of him, I’m inclined to think he’s choking, but his face isn’t going red, and his finger is pointed straight out at one of the patrons.

He’s starstruck, that’s what he is, and when I follow his line of sight, I see why. Broad shoulders and narrow hips wind their way through the store. Dark-blond hair curls and falls forward, and an easy smile cracks a handsome face open.

“Holy shit,” hisses Romeo, swatting my arm. “Are you checking him out?”

“Wha— No! God, no, Romeo. I’m not, he’s...” I do things with my eyes that suggest that I’ve just spotted a real-life famous person, or that I require emergency medical attention. It goes straight over Romeo’s head. He’s on his feet in a second and his hands are cupped on the sides of my face, a pair of makeshift blinkers made specially for me by my jealous boy.

I try not to swoon, but only because the last thing he needs is encouragement.

All I can see, blinkered like this, is Romeo's beautiful face, pinched, brows as high as they can possibly go. "I know he's very good-looking, Jude, but you're *mine*," he growls.

"Good-looking, huh?" I tease. "He's not my type, but it kinda sounds like *you* might be checking him out."

His hands drop to his sides and his eyes and mouth form a series of perfect circles. "Oh no, Jude." He's so earnest he almost looks childlike. "No. I would never. You're so gorgeous, and I love you so much, I'd never, ever—"

I cut him off with a hard kiss that seems to reset him.

"It's Robbie McGuire," I say, giving a surreptitious side-eye in the direction of big smile and broad shoulders.

Romeo's face is totally blank.

"Hockey player?" I prompt. Still blank. "Blinding rookie season?" More blank if such a thing's possible. "Just got traded by the Wranglers?"

"Wranglers? Do you mean jeans or *cowboys*?" There's a tiny flicker of interest in his eyes.

"No." I sigh. "Not jeans or cowboys. *Ice hockey*. Skates. Pucks. Sticks. The New York Wranglers. You know, *my* team."

"Oh," he says, crinkling his nose. "Ice hockey. Ew."

As we gather our things and toss our napkins and paper plates, Romeo mutters, "He's lucky he's not your type, or I'd be forced to kick his ass."

"Romeo!" I exclaim. "Don't you dare attempt to kick the ass of an NHL player!"

"What? You don't think I could take him? 'Cause I could. I'd kick his ass all right. Believe me, I'd kick his ass all the way across town."

"But, Romeo"—my shoulders shake with laughter—"you're a lover, not a fighter." He considers what I've said and eventually concedes, giving me a shrug and the slightest of up-nods. I lean down and nuzzle his neck. "The world's best, most passionate lover."

He turns into me, hands sliding around my sides and wrapping around my back. "You better get going," he groans, "or I'll drag you back home and have my way with you all over again."



I round the bend and head down our street. Leaves on an old red maple tree rustle overhead as I walk. Since Romeo moved to New York, leaves have turned, fallen, and sprouted again. I used to think all summers end. I was sure of it. I thought good things didn't last.

I was wrong.

Seasons have changed around us, but summer hasn't ended.

As I walk, a familiar figure comes into focus. A wisp of white with a smudge of pastel blue across the upper quadrant of an unforgettable face. He's on the step outside our building, waiting for me. There's a black dog at his heel, looking up at him in gooey adoration.

There's nothing unusual about this. It's happened every day since Romeo got here. Every single day, without exception, he waits on the step for me to come home after work. When it snows, he wears a puffer jacket and a red beanie. When it rains, he stands under a big umbrella. But every day, no matter the weather, he waits for me.

It may not seem like a big deal to some, and I'm not saying it's hugely newsworthy or anything like that, but when I see him waiting, every time, every day, my heart starts to pound and my feet leave the ground. I don't take a breath from the second I see him until he's in my arms.

He comes to me easily, movements graceful and fluid. Like the tide rising. Like night drawing in. Every day, Tiger jumps up on us as we embrace, barking loudly, and Romeo and I take turns telling him off.

When we've managed to calm Tiger, we head upstairs, and Romeo unlocks the door to our apartment. It feels like stepping into a Renaissance painting. A moody, sensual painting with muted colors and cracks in the paint. His things and my things have blended together. A perfect cocktail that smells like home and makes me happy.

I inhale deeply, taking it all in. "Mm, God, that smells good... Is that—"

"Chicken fajitas," he says, beaming.

The pile of pages has been neatly stacked for the first time in weeks and a single candle flickers in the space cleared on the dining table. A bottle of

wine and two glasses have been set out. I turn to him and immediately notice something about him is different. There's a spark in his eyes. A secret.

"Are we celebrating something?" I ask.

He gives me a typical Romeo shrug, one that reaches inside me and shakes my spine gently. "It's no big deal," he says, holding a hand up to slow me. "It's early. It's not worth getting excited about..."

"Romeo!! For the love of God, what? Tell me!"

"Okay." He steadies his breathing. "So, I heard back from that agent today. You know, the one I really liked?"

I nod, suddenly unsure I can trust my voice. "And...?"

"And she's requested a full manuscript."

Within days of Romeo moving in, it became clear that "making notes" had graduated to full-fledged writing. He wrote all summer long, determined and unstoppable, typing late into the night and starting well before sunrise. After much begging, he handed me the first three chapters. From the first word, I was transported. His words in black and white had the same effect on me they always had when he spoke them. The same but different. Better. Clearer. The hallucinations they invoked were both terrifyingly vivid and unspeakably brilliant.

"This is it, Romeo," I cried. "This is what you're meant to do. This is what you were made for."

"But, Tiger," he said sweetly, "I was made to love you."

It turns out he's writing a series. Five interlinked books about mythical creatures and unlikely heroes. Winged beasts and real-life events. Tragedies and misunderstandings. Losing people and finding yourself. It's a story about magic and epic adventures, sure, but mostly, it's a story about love.

By the time school was due to start late last August, I'd convinced him he's writing a story that needs to be told.

He finished the first book recently, and I can hardly describe what it did to me when he placed the manuscript in my hands. I felt the weight of his words, a physical thing, and the lightness of the piece of his soul he imbibed it with. For the longest time, I just held it, looking down and reading the title over and over.

Inferno

"Don't get overexcited," he warns. "It's a long shot and a long road with no guarantees, you know that."

“Overexcited? Are you kidding me? This woman is about to read the best book of her whole goddamn life. Of course I’m overexcited!”

Romeo shakes his head and smiles tolerantly at me. “Oh, Jude, you only think that because I wrote you into the story.”

He’s wrong. You’ll see. I know it. I can feel it in my chest. A certainty. A sure thing.

The only thing I’ve ever been more sure about is that I was put on this Earth to love Romeo.

I’m so sure, I have a ring in my pocket. I’ve been carrying it for months, and I already know what I’ll have engraved on it. I’m tempted to give it to him every damn day, but I won’t because the second I read the first page of *Inferno*, I decided to ask Romeo to marry me the day he gets offered a publishing deal.

That’s how sure I am of *Inferno*.

I don’t know what our wedding will be like. I mean, I know there won’t be a dove or a butterfly in sight, but other than that, I don’t really care. Romeo can have whatever he wants. The only thing I want is to spend the rest of my life with him. I have the honeymoon all planned out though. Don’t tell him, but I’m taking him to Verona, Italy.

When we were in Florida recently, visiting my parents, I cracked and told my mom and dad my plan. My mom flapped her hands up and down at her sides like a chicken with something seriously wrong with it, and my dad pulled me in for a big hug and as he did it, I felt his chest heaving.

It was the second time I saw my dad cry.

When dinner is over and the dishwasher has been packed, Romeo and I curl up on the sofa. I’m on my back and he’s lying between my legs with his head on my chest. When I breathe in, I’m hit by the unmistakable scent of old oak trees and faraway places, full circles, and the love of my life.

“How was your day, baby? How’s your mind and how is your heart?” I ask him questions like these every day, and not just because I love the answer so much. Our journey back to each other was treacherous and hard. Both of us were injured, bruised, and beaten, and we hurt others to get here. Some wounds healed with a kiss, and others will take a long time to recover completely. Both of us acknowledge this. We talk about it often, checking in with each other and keeping communication lines open because we know all too well the destruction not doing so can cause. “How are you feeling, my Romeo?”

The solid mass of him shifts slightly and his cheek creases against my chest. He lets out a soft, easy sigh and says the same thing he said yesterday.

And the day before.

And the day before that.

“Whelmed.”

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THANK YOU

Thank you for reading *Romeo Falling*. I hope you enjoyed it half as much as I enjoyed writing it. Once in a while a story burrows its way deep under my skin, and this was one of those stories. I'm sad it's over and I wish I could write it all over again.

If you aren't ready to let Romeo and Jude go either, sign up for my newsletter and receive a bonus chapter of *Romeo Falling*. You'll get to find out what happens to Selby, where Romeo and Jude get married, and what Jude has engraved on Romeo's ring.

<https://www.authorjessehrein.com/>

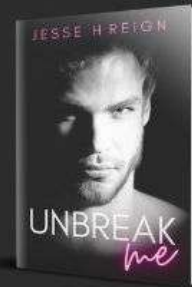
Don't forget to keep an eye out for my next book, *Poetry on Ice*. Big smile and broad shoulders, aka Robbie McGuire, will meet his match in the form of his archrival, Ant Decker. Prepare for fist fights, lace jockstraps, steamy AF communal showers, and strong *are we fighting or fucking?* vibes. Oh, and of course, hockey.

Want to know what to read next?

If you haven't had quite enough pining and heartache, check out *Unbreak Me*. When David Hammond finds himself in the middle of nowhere with a man known to be good with animals and broken people, virginity is lost and hearts are broken and put back together.

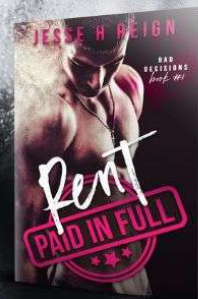
HE SMILED IN A WAY THAT LET ME KNOW, ONCE AND
FOR ALL, HE'S NOT LIKE THE SUN...

He is the sun.



If you're in the mood for a change of pace, a pallet cleanser, so to speak, I recommend *Rent: Paid in Full*. Ryan Haraway is straight up not having a good time at college. He's totally broke and his roommate is an asshole. A rich, entitled asshole. An asshole who's more than happy to pay to get what he wants...even when what he wants turns out to be Ryan.

"Five stars," he drawls, looking me up and down.
and down. *"Will buy again."*



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Mr Reign, aka Mashed Potato/Sweet Potato/Baby Potato/Depends-on-the-day-but-always-some-kind-of-potato. I'm sorry I called out Romeo's name in my sleep. I know it was weird. Thank you for loving me despite the fact I spend my life with one foot in this world, and the other in worlds of my own creation.

My alpha readers S Rodman, Bradley Scott and Cora Rose. Thanks for reading Romeo Falling as I wrote it. Your comments and gentle demands for the next chapter spurred me on, as always.

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And finally, my wonderful ARC readers. Thank you for reading Romeo Falling. I'm so lucky to have you on my team.

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BAD DECISIONS SERIES

Rent: Paid in Full

One-sided enemies-to-lovers/Broke college boy is offered sex in exchange for \$\$\$ by his roommate

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